Anohana Part 1

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Chapter 1: First Memory

What are we doing for fun tomorrow?

At that place, there are endless ways of finding pleasure. Dig in the soft dirt under the trees, and you will find a lot of rhino beetle larvae. You can skip flat stones at the dry river bed. You can play sumo in the pine tree leaves. Daruma-san ga koronda[1] is good too.

The color ghost[2] might be lacking when compared, as the colors in the mountains are nothing but green, light brown, and grey. Where can we find other colors?

Oh, there is that color—white. It's the color of the dress she is always wearing.

But that white is like the jellyfish made of towels when you take a bath: fraughting the air for an instant, then slowly changing to indigo as water invades inside.

Even if it was white, it would still vanish.

Tomorrow, to replace the white that suddenly vanished, I decided to wear a white T-shirt—within that haziness.

Chapter 2: The Beast of Summer

It was so hot at the end of summer it felt suffocating. My messy bangs had grown too long, hitting against my eyelids. I had gone two days without showering and the sweat and oil in my hair irritated me so much that I had to put it up with a rubber band.

Delving into your mind's world and battling with the present seven grave sins and the unknown eighth… I had used one hundred and fifty-six hours on this nonsense that seems to come from a video game for second year students in junior high.

They had understandably deformed the female genitalia. 'Lust' opened and closed repeatedly with a 'kupaa, kupaa' sound. I killed every single one of them relentlessly, recklessly killing the summer of my first year in high school.

The cicada sang, "kupaa, kupaa." It was very hot.

What a lewd design. The thing 'kupaaing' on the monitor squirted weird liquid out of its centre. Trying to dismiss in my mind the fact that I hadn't taken a bath, I pounded every single of these disgusting, filthy beings with a machine gun.

"Jintan, are they Jynx[3]?"

"No."

"But its lips are so fat. Isn't it like Jynx's 'hatoko'?"

... 'Jintan.'

This honey-sweet voice clung even closer to my skin than my sweat and oil.

"Do you know what 'hatoko' means, Jintan? It's your grandpa's little sister's child's child, you know? So that in Menma's case is Kii-kun!"

"..."

Most likely I had been too hungry.

To have a gap induced from boredom and hunger is unacceptable, for it will allow unnecessary feelings to squeeze itself into it against my will.

At these times, one has to be decisive and swiftly fill this gap.

"... Let me eat some Shio ramen[4] then."

"Wah. Shio ramen. Menma wants to eat it too!"

I went into the kitchen next to the living room and lit up the matchsticks inside. The connecting points on the gas stove seemed to have a poor contact. I ignited it by throwing some ashes into the place where the gasoline had flown, and a loud boom was heard.

I like Shio ramen. Having waited for the water to boil, I meticulously threw an egg inside so it won't be stirred.

"Ah, I want the eggs stirred! I want egg flakes!"

Right. I wouldn't stir it. When I eat it, I would lightly poke the lunar-shaped egg to let the half-boiled egg yolk ooze out, crowning the noodles. This way of eating seemed much more mature than eating egg flakes…

"Boo! The egg is getting boiled! Stir it, quick!"

"…"

I would never admit believing in unreal things, for example: UFO, UMA, MRR, or spirits.

"Si..."

I had to regulate my breathing patterns with my nose, because at some point that I was unaware of, my breathing had become strained.

If I had to deny it, I should have to neglect it from the very start. If I were to be a bit wary of it, only just a little bit, it would be the evidence that I had already accepted it as reality.

"Ah. Look! It's expanding already! Quickly stir it… Stir—it—quick!"

Three minutes. Give me three minutes and this will be done.

Nevertheless, three minutes that seemed to fleet so fast when I play games seemed so long now.

Noodles. Please, I beg you to become cooked as quickly as possible—thus I started to pray impatiently. At this moment, the

malfunctioning, tone-deaf doorbell speaker rang its out-of-tone ringtone

"Aren't you going to open the door, Jintan?"

"…"

I would never open the door during my dad's working hours, no matter how many times the bell had rung. This was what I usually do.

However, the things that human beings can neglect simultaneously are finite. Perhaps this ringtone was a godsend to help me.

(Let me get an escape by this chance.)

As I gave thanks for this coincidence, I turned off the stove. Now I couldn't cook the egg into a beautiful lunar shape, and the noodles would also get mucky. Nevertheless, I had no other resort. I then walked to the door.

"Now is the time. Stir!!"

The eggs in the pot seemed to be swished and swooshed. I felt a stream of cold sweat sliding through my back.

"Coming… Mmm!?"

When I opened the creaking door, in front of me stood the visualization of the 'Lust', a woman as if having its sexual organ slapped on her face.

"... Hi."

Having lightly tanned skin, wearing tight aqua-blue suspenders , and being overly exposed—the way she deliberately shows off her immature sexiness- feels overly carnal, she made me uncomfortable.

Splat.

"Hey. Things are going quite well for you ."

"Ah, Ahah…"

What an unlucky day.

Misfortunes never come alone. Rats. How I wish to whack them away: to use the machine gun in the game to shoot everything away, including this real thing and that unreal thing, penetrating them with bullets.

Hey. Wait?

What would happen when this thing sees that?

"… Um. The class teacher told me to give you this, your holiday homework."

The girl in front of me awkwardly stretched a pile of printouts to my face.

"Hah? Holiday homework… It's already the end of August now . The holidays will be over after two days!"

I spoke back in reflex to this girl I haven't spoken to for a long time—three years of no social interaction to be exact. To my blurted doubts, she said, "It's fine. After all, you're always in the holiday mood. Besides, unlike you, Yadomi, I'm very busy."

She said it with a commanding tone completely opposite to her frivolous appearance. From that tone, it was impossible for one to tell the fleeting of years, as if she had completely seen through me.

She was making me impatient.

"Then you can just dump it on me. After all, I wouldn't go to that stupid school!"

When I blurted this out, her aqua-blue suspenders seemed to have become heavier. Her lips twisted, yet she didn't make a sound.

"Mmm…?"

Was she trying to say something? Having noticed, I involuntarily started to concentrate on something…

Then my mind became completely blank, for I had unwillingly shown my mistakes. The girl intentionally aimed at my defensive mistake and quickly lashed a fierce comment at me.

"You should be ashamed of yourself."

“What!?”

"You should be ashamed of yourself."

My blood rose and my ears became hot. What do you know!

I wanted to argue. I wanted to hurt her with the most sharp, impulsive words!

“Eh, who’s there?

“!...”

A sound came from the back, cooling my heating head.

I didn’t look back, trying to see the reaction of this girl—Anaru Anjo. She furrowed her eyebrows as if surprised, but that was only a reaction towards me.

So, Anjo couldn’t see her?

“What’s the matter, Yadomi. You look upset.”

The problematic matter behind me screamed ‘Ahah!’ in joy when it heard Anjo’s voice.

“This voice! I know it! It’s Anaru!!”

Her naïve voice spoke the forbidden word.[5]

“You… Don’t call her Anaru!!”

I interrupted her in reflex. Even if she was the visualization of ' Lust', saying this to her so bluntly was a bit too much.

"… Ah."

Anjo's face slowly turned into a color much more vibrant than brown.

"Ah, Ah, An… Don't call me Anaru!"

She said the same thing as I did. But of course, she said it to me.

I see.

From Anjo's perspective, I was the one who said 'anus'. And she decided to completely ignore that bothersome thing touching her tanned skin and crying repeatedly, 'Anaru, Anaru!'. No, she wasn't ignoring it. She was…

So, this is truly…

"Waaaaghh!?"

Bam. I passed out.

I wasn't like this back then.

In that summer, I didn't have a problem with this heat and this painful sunlight that tanned my skin. During that summer when we were in grade 5 at primary school, we were always seen together.

There was an abandoned, coal-burning, small house on the mountain at the back of our school. We moved a lot of useless ‘ treasures’ there and called it our secret base. We played there for the rest of our summer. All my memories of summer were born there.

We were the ‘Super Peace Busters’.

‘Busters’ was a word we just knew and we just remembered, which seems to mean strong people. We had to safeguard peace and punish evil. With this sublime wish, we gave ourselves this name.

Of course, the first one to propose it was I, the captain.

No one denied my idea. No one cared. For at that time, I was the best at everything, be it running, calculation examinations, or even calligraphy—I had even gotten a silver award.

“Heh. Busters! Though I don’t understand, it feels really cool!”

Yukiatsu was number two. Although his grade in music was better than me, he couldn’t catch me in all other criteria.

“The word ‘super’ feels really strong…”

Tsuruko was a girl who did things at her own pace. She was pretty good at drawing, though, she always drew princess or fairies. If only she could draw something else, then it would be a nice décor to hang on the wall of our secret base.

"If we use this name, we will have to really safeguard peace seriously. Can everyone do it?"

Anaru was abnormally serious and does things according to rules. For example, she would go sweep the secret base when no one told her so. She would even get angry when I wiped my nose with the collar of my jacket. She was exactly like the lady of my neighbour.

"Mmmahh! It's super cool! Jintan!"

Poppo, though small and timid, would take off his pants sometimes, which was very fun; hence, I liked to bring him around to play.

"Then it's decided. Is it, Jintan!"

Then there was Menma.

Menma's honey-sweet voice had always given me energy. She always cried, and when she did, her eyes looked like glass pearls filled with water from the ocean.

Her grandfather seemed to be a foreigner, and she seemed to be a quarter mixed. Her soft milky hair looked like sunlight could penetrate it. If you smell closely, you might even smell faintly an unknown fragrance of flower from her…

Every time I hear Menma's voice, I would rush to her, showing off the coolest side of myself.

Yes. As the captain, I had to run in front of everyone else. I could never trip and have an ugly side.

If I were to trip, I would rather fly away.

This was such an immature thinking, but I indeed had this feeling back then.

But the one to fly away wasn't me.

Buzz…

The flapping sounds of B29 came from afar.

'Super Peace Busters' decided to investigate wars for the summer's free investigation. With this vague investigation topic, we asked an old man nearby who had a problem walking.

"Ahah. I was just around as tall as you guys at that time. I escaped into the air-raid shelter, holding my little brother at my arms. My brother held my thighs tightly. It was a very warm scene …"

I looked at my own warm thigh.

"!..."

A thin leg was pressing my thigh tightly.

She took my arms as a pillow, and slept near my shoulders. She had promisingly long eyelashes on her sleeping face. I lightly smelled the air—a faint fragrance of flowers.

"I… must have gone nuts."

Buzz, the electric fan kept swinging its head, denying with its might anything in front of it. Although I had never noticed it before, it actually was quite gentle.

At the moment, I was in a seriously acute situation.

This fragrance of flower and this sleeping face were once registered in my mind, yet I don't remember them, because…

"Mmm…"

From the chest part of the dress, I could see the white bulging part that had the power and beauty to make every color to lose their brightness. I looked at her tipsily. Everything I knew about her shouldn't have been mixed with the feelings I have towards her now.

There was also that leg that bluntly pressed on my lower abdomen. It was like a fleshy, slick, bright carp. Her kneecaps bent into an acute angle. Even her skirt was curled up. Under that, though I could not see from this perspective, I thought it would be like…

"…"

If I don't get away with the heaviness and the wriggle on my lower abdomen, things will get dismal.

I could never let my sexual impulse in my puberty to rush out in this abnormal situation. Lightly and meticulously, I took away my wrists.

“Mmm…”

My heart thumped. I stiffened, not daring to move an inch. The wrecker blinked her eyes, bringing her long eyelashes in motion.

“Ah… Morning, Jintan.”

A soft smile then bloomed at me. This soft smiling face… Ahah.

It was the same as in my memory, making me dizzy.

“That’s great. You just fell over. I thought you would be dead.”

“…”

I thought… you would be dead…

“Wu… Wuaghhh!!”

I cried, jumped up violently, and ran away.

“Ji-Jintan!?”

Crack crack crack… Boom!

I rushed into the washroom, closed the door, and locked it, but this was not enough to make me assured, so I held it tightly with my hand.

"What's the matter? Jintan!"

Bong, bong, bong. The door quaked.

A few months back then, when I entered high school for not even a week, I escaped outside and ran back home.

Everything was peaceful as long as I hide in home; however, I couldn't believe even in state there would be an intruder.

The place that could accommodate me had become narrower and narrower. My helplessness has grown to—If were invaded even here, then I had no place to escape. This is my last defense: I had to protect it.

"Poo pooing? Hey, are you poo pooing?"

Can't you even let me to think seriously?

I would never admit unreal things. I don't believe in anything pertaining to spirits, but if she really is real…

If she really is Honma Meiko…

Then why had she grown a bit from back then. Why… why?

"W-Why do you have to come to my place?!"

"Heh?"

My voice was trembling. I realised even my kneecaps were trembling. What a shame. Nevertheless, this was an emergency situation. I was not the one to be blamed.

"Are you a spirit?!"

"Yeah, should be?"

"Not should be, but be! Why until now… besides, you've grown, why do you have to come to my place?!"

"Mmm… Even if you ask me I won't know."

"…"

She said she didn't know.

This was an accentuation of speech that an anime character used in a hit anime. For this relieving tone, the trembling of my legs stopped without my noticing.

"But, let me guess. Menma probably wants to make a wish come true!"

"Wish… right. What wish?"

"Umm. I don't know!"

How calm you sound. The tone of your voice sounded sounded exactly to gain pleasure from the situation I was stuck in.

"Ah. Jintan, come out!"

Although I was still afraid, my mind seemed to have become more stupid.

The situation I was in was too strange. If she were a spirit, she would have the look of a spirit and scare the hell out of me. Otherwise, this actually was…

"… It can't come true."

Menma cocked her head, making a little 'eh?' doubtful sound.

I rebuked her loudly, "If you don't even know what's your wish , how can you make it come true?! What do you want? You!"

"Ahah! Your saliva is spurting out! Bother! Look at my defensive wall! Eh~ Wait for a moment…"

Menma put her hands under her chin, posing a face of contemplation.

"Yeah… a wish. A wish that could only come true when everyone is back together!"

"Everyone…?"

"Right! Everyone is everyone! Super Peace Busters!"

Ah… There seemed to be something squiggling at the depths of my throat. This was a memorable, painful sound.

Super Peace Busters.

"Let's first go find Anaru's help! We didn't make a good greeting just then…"

I quickly interrupted her to stop her from saying anymore.

"As you can see, she's not the Anaru you know anymore."

"Heheh? Isn't Anaru Anaru?"

She looked to have grown older, yet she was still a child inside—completely the same. She didn't even hear what I had been saying.

"I was saying! She isn't the Anaru back then. Even if you find that blonde, she wouldn't help!"

"B-Blonde?"

"That means a dumb woman! To put it short, she's not our friends…"

"No!"

I freaked out, looking at Menma. Her eyes with pale colors were welling with tears, like glass pearls filled with water from the ocean…

"No… I hate Jintan who would say bad things about Anaru!"

"… Menma."

"Hey. Let's go find Anaru again, okay? Let's go seek for her help, Jintan!"

That spirit forced me to find the past pals.

She forced me with dropping tears. This situation was too amusing. However, her tears were in sync with something for no apparent reason.

Right. This girl maybe wasn't a spirit.

It was my psychological pressure, my trauma… my sense of guilty. It was a visualization of all that heat that lashed on me in the summer.

When I put it this way, the reason why Anju couldn't see Menma was convincing.

This was because Menma who stood in front of me now was only my own hallucinations.

It was the hallucinations I created at that summer to reproach myself at this summer.

"…"

Fu. I heaved a long sigh.

I puffed away all the surprise, wavering, and perhaps some of my edited over-sweet scenes from my stomach, puffing them out all in one breath.

“I understand. I’ll leave it to Anaru to help your wish come true ."

“Jintan!”

With still some tears in her eyes, Menma bloomed a soft, delightful smile.

That’s right, I only have to ask for her help.

Then Menma and also ‘the I back then’ could accept it.

It wasn’t only Anaru that changed, every other thing also did.

The heat outside was even of a higher level than that in my home.

The dusk of late summer—how ashamed it was for these words with such beautiful pronunciation. The asphalt road had been heated soft. The back of my shoe stuck on the floor, unable to get a step out of the house. So, I didn’t leave a step.

It definitely wasn’t because I was scared.

“Jintan, aren’t you going to greet your neighbours?”

Menma, walking in front of me, noticed the whispers of the ladies nearby who was looking at me.

Let me think. At this map—in front my house's door—these people as enemies are ones that could be easily fought. I didn't have a need to be sneaking around. I only need to look ruthlessly back at them, and they would quickly avert their eyes in apology.

There was no need to be afraid. These guys had absolutely no menace to my life. That's right, I don't have a need to abstain from their sight. But this might be a bit bad for dad, as he had never reproached me who had been squandering life. But if I was attacked, I could only defend.

I had completely used all my energy to fight off these small potatoes.

"Eh? Jintan. Shouldn't we head this side for Anaru's home?"

I was choosing which way to go. I wanted to choose a road that most students in my same school wouldn't walk on. However, no matter which way I go, the roadside scene seemed to be the same. Everything was mountains, mountains, and more mountains, for this was the basin. Be it the supermarket or the park, the background was always mountains.

So there were many mountains. Could I ask for a mountain to vibrantly self-destruct or collapse? There's no way of escaping at this rate.

It was only me who locked myself in a place. I rejected all the feelings of the outside world and hid in a corner, for I hated this city.

"Anaru's home. I hadn't gone there for a long time. Very long time poo poo?"

Menma, the mixture of my trauma and psychological pressure, the hallucination created by myself back then to reproach 'the present I', was in a good mood.

"Anaru dragged Jintan into the house when Jintan suddenly fell down on the floor with a splat. After that, she even covered Jintan with a blanket!"

Is this for real…

"Then, she also turned off the stove, took the mucky noodles, and stored them in the fridge!"

That was way too much…

"Oh and, when she dragged Jintan into the room, she said, 'it stinks!'"

If I had known earlier, I would have taken a bath.

"Anaru is really gentle! Ah, but Anaru she…"

"Stop."

I still interrupted her in reflex despite the fact that obviously no one could see her or hear her.

"She… Um. Could you stop calling her Anaru? Call her Anjo or Naruko."

"Eheh? Why?"

When I was small, I gave her this nickname without much deeper thought. I called her Anaru by taking out 'An' from Anjo and 'Naru' from Naruko and combining them together, for I thought back then that everything was the coolest when making abbreviations. For example, referring Super Mario as 'Sumari', Final Fantasy 'Fifa'.

Children are such deadly and lively creatures. If I had known what it meant, I would have given her a much more meaningful name than Anaru… however.

"Ah! Dandelions!"

"…"

She didn't hear a word I was saying.

'The Traumatic Pressure Reproaching Menma' was picking dandelions leisurely. This scene was overly natural—the flowers that bloom at this time are Common Dandelions—mum taught me this fact when I was small. I could still remember it vaguely.

"Here, BCG!"

Liquid oozed from the scar on the pinched flower. Menma put the scar side on my hand, the white liquid spread on my hand, printing the section of the side of the scar of the flower.

"This is…"

"Jintan seems to be feeling unwell, so I'm giving Jintan medicine!"

The reason why I'm feeling unwell is because of you—though I wanted to tell this to her, I swallowed my words as soon as I saw her natural smile, a smile so normal it was almost perfect.

"Ah, there are also some here! There are also dandelions here. Dandelions, dandelions, dandelions?" Menma sang arbitrarily while picking the dandelions. She would pinch the flowers with her thumb, and 'prack!', tearing the flower part off, taking the dandelion life away naively.

Indeed.

Menma was a hallucination I created to reproach myself.

She didn't say she hated me, nor did she use any power. She only used a bit to whack me, to tell me, to show me, that she wasn' t here anymore.

"Jintan. Look!"

Ahah. Why would I so calmly accept this abnormal situation? Had my brain malfunctioned or stopped operating due to this summer heat?

Perhaps tired of the dandelion massacre, Menma turned to crawling onto the wooden face on the roadside, jumping along the fence.

My head still felt heavy... I stared blankly at Menma's bare white foot. It wasn't a foot of a small girl but a woman.

Speaking of which, she wasn't wearing any shoes. Why would she appear like that when even her legs had grown? Perhaps it was because of the lack of experience in my trauma that 'the I back then' couldn't imagine the styles of shoes that young women would wear.

"Ah…?!"

Menma suddenly screamed. My heart thumped. My mind became completely blank.

Menma was swaying on the fence, unable to keep her balance. She then slipped on the ten-centimeter-wide square safe zone of that fence.

"Mmm..?!"

That day, at that moment, I came to my senses.

I didn't see the accident.

However, this scene repeatedly appeared in my mind, no matter how I wanted to forget it. It was like I was the one that experienced it—even the smell of mosses and the touch of the soil were in my memories.

That day, I went home alone. Normally, I would still be together with everyone playing, but I got angry and ran away. When I think of it, that day I ate miso ramen instead of shio ramen.

And from that day on I hadn't eaten any. But actually, I like miso ramen more than shio ramen.

My dad's car was parked at the door. He potently swung the door open. I felt a sense of aberrance. He opened the door in a flurry. Incoherent sounds of footsteps and the expanding aberrance added together.

"Jintan! Menma, she…"

I couldn't hear what he was saying.

No. I didn't want to hear. Yet, even when I had tried to terminate my ability to think, a scene flashed upon my eyes, a screen that forcibly filled my vision.

'Menma, she…'

There was a trough slightly below the secret base.

'slipped'

Connected to the trough was a slope which led to a place with rotten pine cones, a vast, deep place with swift currents…

'and fell down.'

"Wuuarrghhh!!"

I dashed to her.

I wanted to catch Menma; I wanted to catch Menma who was now falling from the wooden fence; I wanted to change the ending that day. However, my hands couldn't reach her.

"… Jintan?"

Menma looked at me, as if she was freaked out. Perhaps she jumped down according to her falling direction.

Besides, she was just my own hallucination. She wouldn't really die. Nevertheless, what was I agitating for? Feeling relieved, I felt a rush of bitterness and despise.

"What are you doing?! You…!!"

It was at this moment when I couldn't help myself from roaring.

"… What are you doing?"

That a male voice completely different from mine was heard from my back.

It was an unfamiliar and low voice, but that voice seemed a bit familiar nevertheless. My heart thumped greatly, going out of control.

The man standing right there had the uniform of the high school I wanted to enter.

He was number 2 of Super Peace Busters, Matsuyuki who lost to me a little bit in everything. Stood beside him was Chiriko who did things at her own pace…

When was I caught by them?

Were you so strong back then?

Or was I who tripped and fell?

"What are you doing? Are you all right?"

"Ah! Ahah… No."

There wasn't anything, and I wasn't sure what was happening. I knew deeply that I used the Japanese wrongly. I averted my eyes and wore on my hat.

I had to get out of here, quick.

"Wuaghh! It's Yukiatsu and Tsuruko!"

Menma screamed in joy, running towards them, not paying any heed to my feelings—was it a part of reproaching me?

"Hey. Let's get out of here, Menma!"

Words slipped out of my mouth due to my irascibleness.

Matsukyuki's face froze instantly.

"Hah? Are you saying 'Menma'?"

Matsuyuki's lips trembled lightly. Chiriko, feeling unpleasant, gazed at Matsuyuki and I repeatedly.

What came lashing on me was blatant anger.

"You. Are you still talking about that until now?"

"Stop, Matsuyuki!"

Chiriko glared at Matsuyuki with her eyes slant, but Matsuyuki didn't care and continued, "I heard that you didn't go to school, Yadomi."

"!!"

It was very hot under the nylon hat. It's about to boil.

Why would you know… No. Why would the captain be despised by number two?

Noticing the subtle atmosphere around us, Menma who had been shouting in joy just now had calmed down and looked at me worryingly.

"Having entered the worst school here and became a shut-in at last who would only call Honma Meiko's name. Have you gone nuts?"

"Matsuyuki, stop saying it… Ah!"

You don't have to tell me! I turned away and left.

"Jintan!?"

Menma's voice came from behind. "I hate Yukiatsu who would say bad things about Jintan!!"

I didn't run. I just accelerated my walking pace.

I didn't want to be reckoned as escaping, nor do I want them to see me getting away difficultly. Having turned through the street corner, I finally escaped from their sight. At that instant, my sweat came popping up.

No, I had already let them see myself getting away difficultly. The inside of the nylon hate was filled with sweat and felt extremely itchy. Not only was my head, but my whole body was itchy, for I hadn't taken any baths, even my blood vessels also…

"Jintan. Wait for me!"

Menma's voice sounded from behind, but I didn't turn back. I just stopped and stood still.

Menma's bare foot had not a bit of a bruise. I understood now. I understood now what you wanted to do.

The young me was reproaching the present me.

The thing that hurt me, that completely fought me down, that let my heart filled with past regrets… you wanted to see this kind of me, don't you?

However, Menma, after all this had happened...

“After all this had happened, you should understand now. Everyone has changed… No.”

I staggered, then continued in a low voice, “and the one who changed the most is me.”

“Eh…?”

“It’s about it. Let me go.”

“!!”

I turned around and faced Menma. For the back light of the setting sun, I couldn't see clear Menma’s face. Nevertheless, I could see that her foot was small and had no bruises.

I wanted to smile, but my face muscles only formed a strange arc. But I couldn’t not laugh, for if I did, the past me would be unsatisfied.

Would the past me laugh his head off when he saw me having such a difficulty in laughing? It didn’t matter anymore. Go ahead and laugh. But…

“Let go of me… You may not understand, but I also have a tough life… after that…”

“Jintan…?”

"Yes. Really tough… So, I don't want to…"

I didn't know what to say about something I didn't want to happen again, so I kept silent and turned around and ran away. Even if she saw my forlorn back while running away, it didn't matter anymore.

Not only because she was a hallucination I created, for even if she really were Menma, it didn't matter for her to see me like this.

Back then I endeavoured to show her my greatest and coolest side.

Menma didn't come to chase me.

I entered my dark room, turned on the lights… Pat. All the hidden things in the dark were shown.

The blanket was still left there; the electronic fan kept swinging as usual. I stepped on the on/off button with my foot and turned it off with my toe.

The mucky ramen was left in the fridge. It wasn't an edible thing anymore, so let me just leave it there.

"…"

I heaved a sigh and lay flat down.

Entering my eyes was the prizes hanging on the wall of the room: calligraphy exhibition, endurance running, writing competition… this was the graveyard of my past glories.

Why—why would I become like this?

I flunked my examinations and entered an annoying high school… No, these things don't really matter. These weren't the real cause.

In the shrines lay my mother's photo. Mum who lived long in the hospital died when I was primary six. It was right at the next year's summer after Menma's death. And thus the nearby ladies always gossip, "for he lost his mum in such a sensitive period". They didn't know a thing. This wasn't the real cause either.

It was utterly impossible to find one thing to explain the real cause.

But there was one thing I was sure of.

At that summer, everything became different.

We had been the Super Peace Busters.

We protected the peace of everywhere. I was the captain, of course, for I was number one in everything.

Matsuyuki… Yukiatsu, Tsuruko, Anaru, Poppo, and also Menma all agreed to this. Everyone followed at my back, trotting—following behind me at all times.

Yes. That day was the same.

"Jintan… Do you like Menma?"

Everything started with a question Anaru asked.

“Hah?”

I was suffering from this unexpected blow.

This question was exactly strangely delicious bait. Everyone started to heckle with, “we want to know!” “Does Menma like Jintan too?” All kinds of thoughts popped up. I was filled with a mysterious pleasure, and blurted in anger, “You idiots!”, and thinking I would get away with it…

“Tell the truth. Super Peace Busters should not hide things from each other.”

Yukiatsu forced me with a serious face.

“Tell, tell… tell, tell?”

Poppo also racked things up with his stupid voice, the voice that was in sync with the rhythmic heat and the songs of cicadas. With a red face, Menma said, “ehhhh! How would this...” and got embarrassed.

As a captain, I even got forced by them to confess.

I was a bit angry. If things went on like this, my respect as a leader would be all gone. To put an end to this messy situation, I blurted something out.

“Who would like such an ugly girl!”

The racked up chorus ended in an instant.

The cicadas was still singing… At the moment I cried it out loud , something in a corner of my heart told myself that I things would turn totally bad.

I thought she would cry.

For Menma was such a cry baby, but…

"… Hehe."

Menma smiled—soft and a bit troubled…

What was this kind of smile like?

The embarrassment hidden within the anger expanded quickly, and thus I escaped.

"Ah… don't run away, Jintan!"

Menma chased me. Stop! Stop coming! If you come won't we get even more suspected? So stop coming!

Menma fell down, but that didn't stop me from running away. It was not something Menma raised, yet it pertained to Menma, hence my embarrassment and anger. That was what I thought back then.

Because Menma… she smiled.

I apparently tried to make her angry and hurt her.

Yes. I felt shameful of myself.

However, I could not put forth my feelings and speak them out. I only wanted to cry.

Dad should come back for a moment, and then go to the hospital to visit mum. Placed on the short table of a house shone by the setting sun was a bag with miso ramen. Beaten eggs were chopped onions put in a big bowl wrapped over with a preservative film. Using these to deal with my dinner, yet paying much attention to the details—it had the style of my dad.

I turned on the television, letting it sit there, and boiled the noodles, hearing "Yooh"[6] from behind, and also "ayoo, thank you for waiting everybody"[7].

Idling around and looking at the egg sink down into the pot, I made a decision.

Tomorrow, I would suddenly jump at Menma from behind and bind her neck with my arms. She certainly would fall down, and then at this time I would get a hold of her steadily to prevent her from falling down. Let me pull such a prank.

And then, I would cry out loud, "My dear Menma[8]!"

I had even devised the tone of my cry and the details of binding her. This idea sounded nice, even I thought so too myself.

It was even funnier than the jokes on the television.

However, after long practice, I didn't have the chance to employ it. I couldn't apologise.

Menma had already died.

The Super Peace Busters.

As its name implies, we busted the perfect peace and got poles apart from each other without knowing it.

Was it because of Menma's death?

No, even if Menma hadn't an accident, we were a lot far from each other originally. Be it our hobbies, the colors we liked, or the jokes we liked—all of them were different.

It was only we were too small that we didn't notice this decisive disparity… and got together by luck. So, separation was inevitable.

"…"

What had I been saying about "it's about it, let me go"?

Sure, I had been having a tough life. Five years had passed since Menma's accident, but when I think of Menma, the place near my stomach had a feeling of clutching together.

However, I didn't reckon that I had atoned my sins. For it was of my cause that Menma would… even if my trauma didn't find me trouble—even if I was not reproached—I would still be clung with impulse to destroy myself.

Yet, why would I see Menma?

Jintan.

At that time, she would always call me with such a honey-sweet voice. She was a cry baby, yet she smiled at that time.

On that day, I really wanted to apologize… to say sorry to her. Indeed.

I wanted to say I was sorry to Menma.

"!!"

A stream of current went through my spine. I couldn't wait any longer. I rushed out the door with an impulse that couldn't be left waiting any longer.

At the instant I clung my shoes, the door opened. Dad had got off work and returned.

"Ah. Eh. Jinta, where are you going?"

"Just for a round!"

I got past my dad and dashed outside.

Go… to the vicinities.

The roadside scene faded away with my heavy breathing sounds.

Compared to the dashing speed and the pleasure of fighting with wind my mind created, the real me was worn off quite soon, my legs becoming soft, about to collapse. After that, I couldn't stop myself from screaming out, "If I were to trip, I would rather fly away!"

I had always wished.

I had always wished for the day after that day—the day I could apologize to Menma.

Chapter 3 : The Night of Curry

Meiko walked on her bare feet.

At night, the asphalt road still had traces of the heat of the setting sun: it was a bit warm, a bit moist, and very serene and tranquil.

Walking on this road, I stepped on it with my foot and rubbed it against my foot. I felt a slight pain from under my foot, a vague pain as if punched on the cheeks when dreaming while sleeping.

(Where had Menma gone until now?)

Because of this vague pain, Meiko started to become numb to time. She couldn't remember anything. The only thing she knew was that a long time had passed since then.

Meiko reminisced the instant she vanished from the world.

(Did it hurt?)

At the instant she tried to remember it, a sharp, cold pain like a piece of glass slicing through her back shot right through her.

She wanted to fulfil a wish.

That wish could only be fulfilled when everyone in the Super Peace Busters are together.

Every time she thought of something about herself, pain would crawl on her whole body, but this didn't. This was the only fact that wouldn't hurt when she thought of it.

She wanted everyone to know how each other felt, just like back then.

However, because of her adamant thoughts…

(Jintan…was hurt because of me.)

Jinta's leaving scene kept running on her mind.

Jinta said that he had a tough life after that, and that everyone had changed.

Meiko wanted to deny this fact. She wanted the Super Peace Busters, including Jinta, to return to how they were before.

She knew, however, practically nothing after she passed away. As such, she wasn't fit to make decisions for others…she was aware of this.

"Arghahahahaha!!"

A coarse laugh interrupted Meiko's hesitation.

(Eh…?)

"Arghahaha! Naruko, you really did go there—to Yadomi's house. You're fabulous!"

"Eh. Yeah. It's so troublesome!"

Naruko and her high school friends strolled in front of the station.

If they didn't have a special destination, McDonalds would have been a great choice. Or they could spend a bit more and go to a family restaurant to kill time. However, they chose to gather in front of the station and chat there. This was to flaunt their equipment to the pedestrians.

She was wearing a new-bought, laced bra, and had her fingernails coloured aqua-blue last night.

"Ahaha…!"

When did her laughing voice sound so loud? Naruko sometimes would even think this inconceivable.

Since the autumn of grade 2 in middle school, she would wear super-short skirts. By the summer of grade 3 she even started to wear high-heeled shoes.

Naruko was thinking about Jinta. She saw him today, but it had been a long time. The last time dated back to the opening ceremony of the school.

(How does he think of me?)

After Meiko's incident, the Super Peace Busters drifted apart. Gradually, Jinta's attitude changed. To sum it up in one word, it was the word 'sullen'.

There were quite a few children around here who have to face the examination of promotion to high school. They entered the same high school, yet every time they meet in the corridor, Jinta would always turn away, pretending he didn't see her.

Naruko wanted to catch Jinta's attention.

Would he say anything to her after she had taken off her glasses ?

No, he didn't.

Would he say anything to her after she had worn super-short skirts?

No, he didn't.

There was only once, during the third year of middle school, that she caught Jinta saying something when they met.

"…like some straw."

At that time, Naruko bought a hair dye and tried her first time in dying her hair, but she messed up the bleaching time and made her hair bleach too much colour.

Nevertheless, it was enough to excite her.

To see Jinta leaving and shouting like this was exciting and joyful.

‘What should I do now? Time’s up.”

Naruko’s friend’s voice pulled Naruko back to reality.

“Ah. Yeah.”

“There aren't any good ones here. Let’s just play around a bit and get out of here.”

Naruko and her friends agreed to go to sing KTV with boys from other schools later. KTV partying, chatting in front of the station, or buying a one-hundred-yan snack if starving…going to Tokyo for shopping via the express at the holidays to buy exclusive things there—this was the vanity they were submerged in.

They spent their time with a serious attitude after lessons were over in their rural school.

They left their beverage cans on the bench they sat and left.

This was their everyday life.

“…”

Naruko imitated their behaviour.

This was uneasy for Naruko, who loved to clean things up. If she were to walk forward a few steps and throw it into the trash bin beside the vending machine…she really wanted to do this, but …

"Naruko?"

"Ah, sorry. Wait for me!"

She left the can alone. She didn't have time to care for the different thoughts in her mind. She only had to focus on what was happening before her: there was no need to care for abandoned things.

Naruko began to think when she had turned into such a person.

At the same moment, Menma stared at the person Naruko had now become.

(Anaru littered…)

Menma was a bit shocked, not because she wanted to reproach her for littering, but that the person Naruko once was would never do such an act.

She did everything according to rules and loved to clean things up. When Meiko was eating a sweet cone, she would even pick up the scraps that had fallen beside her.

(Anaru looked she didn't really smile…)

Her pink chin painted with lipstick was a triangle, an expression of smiling. Even her eyes were bent…but that was not the smile Meiko knew.

Having confirmed that Naruko and her friends had left, Meiko picked up the can and threw it into the trash bin. The can knocked on the bottom of the bin and caused a clear crackling sound.

The leaves of the persimmon tree she was familiar with rustled in the night wind.

Meiko had gone to the family that raised her.

She had a feeling that there wasn't an urgent need to come back here. Meiko who had a vague memory didn't have a strong sense of belonging to this place. This place occurred to her a place she had been just yesterday. This feeling scared her for no reason.

(What should I do...)

Should she enter? She was scared to enter, but she didn't know why.

Her thighs tensed, and her thumb curled up and opened up unconsciously. Suddenly, a rich, attracting scent flew into Meiko's nose…

"Curry!"

Meiko blurted.

It was Meiko's favourite curry. Mashing the sweet corn grains with a mixer into a mush, and then putting a lot of other things into it makes honey-sweet curry. Her brother Satoshi liked it a lot, and her dad would also eat it with Worcestershire sauce[9]…

When she thought of this, her confused perception of time was eased, and she regained some sense of belonging.

At this moment, the doorknob Meiko was holding onto…

"Good evening…"

She pushed it a bit, creating a little gap, for her to spy inside and have a look at the living room.

"!!"

Meiko's shoulders shivered.

When Meiko once again saw Jinta, Naruko, Chiriko, and Atsumu, all she felt was pure happiness.

But when she saw her own family members in the living room …

Her dad had grown a lot of white hair. Satoshi had grown a lot in a short time, looking like a young man. And her mum…had wrinkles on the corners of her eyes.

Changes. Everyone would change. Jinta and the others changed. Nevertheless…

(Ah…ne? What the...)

Everything was different. It was not the Honma Home she had in her memory.

They didn't talk: dad was reading the newspaper; Satoshi was playing the DS. On the table were dishes of curry surplus…Back then, mum would say in a lively voice, "The dishes had to be put to the sink!".

But now mum was placing a small bowl of curry into a shrine that was installed here after Meiko's death.

Then she rang the bell and clasped her hands, maintaining an upright sitting position, her thin socks pressingly softly against the skin of her feet.

"…"

Meiko stopped moving.

She didn't remember seeing this shrine before. Suddenly realising what that meant, she refrained from approaching it—she also refrained from approaching her beloved mum.

"Mum, can you stop giving the shrine a bowl of curry every time we have curry?"

(Satori…?)

Playing the DS, Satori complained, without even the slightest intention to lift his head and look at mum. “It looks very troublesome.”

“You shouldn’t say this.”

Mum wore a face Meiko had never seen.

“Because your sister is a bit muddle-headed.”

It was as if the smallest and lightest ripple induced by the wind crossed her face. She seemed she had held back her tears, yet she seemed nevertheless crying…

“So, your sister may not even be aware she has passed away.”

The words of Meiko’s mother gave Meiko the creeps, making her shiver.

Following her shivering, the cup beside her was swept to the floor, making a bang sound.

“Satori. What are you doing? Go pick it up.”

“Hey. It wasn’t me!”

Satori was falsely accused by her father again. However, Meiko wasn’t even feeling the urge to protect her. She just murmured absent-mindedly.

“I know it…”

She knew little about this present world, but this was home. This home wasn't the Honma Home she once knew, and thus she was more alarmed of this unpalatable truth.

"Menma knows that she have already passed away."

When she got outside, the warm night wind blew against her.

The fact of her passing away was perhaps painful…much more painful than having to accept the Japanese encephalitis vaccine[10].

Yet she wasn't a member who shared this memory. Her mother and other family members, on the other hand, were. They must have accepted this memory and this pain for her, bearing it for her ever since.

(Sorry…)

She uttered secretly in her heart.

Chapter 4 : Second Memory

It was a swaying white colour. Jellyfish made of towels had to be flowers.

Who picked the white, adorable, petite flower?

Come on. Let us repent.

Chapter 5 : Menma's Wish

I went back home and checked: Menma was not there.

Would she just vanish like this? If she really vanished, did this mean he had forgiven me, the present me?

No. It should be completely the opposite: he wanted to make me feel much more pain.

It was because I had always wanted to say 'my dear Menma' that I saw the hallucination of Menma.

'The present I' was coward and timid.

"Jinta, what bath salt do you want? Kusatsu or Abashiri?[11]"

My dad's slovenly voice sounded from the bathroom. As usual, I told him anything was fine.

Dad didn't have any means to reproach me for not going to school. He just acted usually and lived a leisure life. However, it was certainly abnormal for him to permit his son me to hide at home.

He even helped me to put bath salts after he had finished bathing. This kind of care, or this kind of empathy weighed too much on me.

Having bathed and unwinded, the first thing my dad did was not to drink beer but to brew coffee.

Then, he also placed a cup in mum's shrine. Crossing his legs, he sat in front of it and drank slowly with her.

"Touko, I'll also do my best today—to do my best."

It was a saying mum always repeated.

My mum's body conditions weren't good from the start. Ever since I got into senior classes of primary school, she had always been living in the hospital. I hated the view from the windows of the ward, as it was a scene that would only change colour according to the seasons. I would always find excuses to abstain from seeing her.

I didn't want to see mum's face even changing quicker than the view outside the window in that unchanging ward…the only thing was…

I would have never expected Menma would pass away even earlier than mum would.

That day, my father also told me not to tell mum about this. I also planned on doing so.

Yet rumours spread fast in this town, and got to the hospital swiftly. When my mum heard of this, she…

"Jinta, you have to do your best—to do your best."

She didn't ask me anything, and only repeated her usual motto, lightly holding me in her arms.

Her warm chest and rhythmic heat beat patterns assured me. When I was still a baby, mum would do this to me every time I cry . But at that time, mum's chest was skinny and thin, her collarbone exposed, the rich smell of medicine running into my nose…my eyes started to become sour—the dam collapsed and tears overflowed, way beyond my control.

I wanted to see Menma—I really wanted to. I wanted to cry and sob at that skinny chest.

"What am I doing…" I couldn't help but murmur. The chance came to me, the rare chance that I could apologise. Even if it was a hallucination, something I made up, still wasn't it a rare chance I could apologise?

I was lost in thought and didn't enter the bathroom until dad had gone upstairs.

When I came back to my senses, the television had already been playing snowflakes. I didn't turn it off but stared at its screen, lost in abstraction.

"Jin-Ta-Kun! Come-out-and-play!"

I was woken up by this straightforward voice, filled with wondrous intonation.

When I lifted my head, a vague sense told me it was already morning. Dad seemed to have already gone to work. I stood up, shaking, my scapula making creaking sounds.

"Jin-Ta-Kun! Come-out-and-play!"

Although I wanted to neglect her, I couldn't do so. This annoying sound that had the same tone and the same repeated greeting sound—ah, it was Hisakawa.

Reluctantly, I opened the door. Hisakawa had turned his scooter's throttle wide open at the bright morning.

"I've come to meet you, Jintan!"

"Hah? To meet me…"

"Yesterday night, I heard the broadcast 'Pray Like the Stars' at my workplace. I felt that wishes are things to be fulfilled! So I've thought over it!"

"I told you. There is no way…"

"Ah. That's okay! I've already called everyone!"

"Haah?" So surprised I was even my voice shuddered. According to Hisakawa, he had already informed every member of Super Peace Busters of the appearance of Menma, and everyone had agreed to meet.

"Everyone becomes so serious when they think of Menma. This is love!"

"…" It was too suspicious.

I wanted to drop out, but I dismissed this idea and went with the flow.

“I understand…let me first change my clothes. Wait for a moment.”

“Oh! I’ll wait for you no matter how long it takes, my partner!”

While I changed my shirt, I thought to myself: Hisakawa must have filtered my trauma, my hallucinations with his ‘Poppo filtering machine’ and exaggerated it. Originally I had been alleged to be sick, now I was bound to be reckoned sick.

I remembered the eyes of Yukiatsu when he looked down on me—if I don’t see them now, most likely I would incessantly remember those eyes he held.

I wore the most neat and tidy clothes I had and stretched my hand towards the nylon hat that was a few degrees lower than my eye view.

“Forget it.”

I didn’t want Yukiatsu to scoff at me again. No, I don't want anyone to scoff at me. Even if I had changed completely, I still had some remains of self-esteem...

...although I knew that self-esteem would only aggravate this situation.

Chapter 6 : The French Fries Deity

(Friends, friends…they say it as if they are a religion.)

Sitting in McDonalds, beaten by a hit song being played inside, Chiriko stirred her strawberry milkshake with a straw.

The song praises friends, saying that no matter how time flies, friends would never change their trust on each other. At this situation, it was undoubtedly a song that got on her nerves.

Yet, Atsumu, sitting opposite of her, just drank hot coffee with a calm and indifferent face.

“Do you think he will really come?”

“I don’t know…”

Atsumu fiddled with his phone, looking at Tetsudo’s message.

They had diverted and weren’t the close friends they were, yet Tetsudo clung his neck from the back and forced him to exchange email addresses with him as well as Chiriko, as Tetsudo was exhilarated by having a phone at last.

The text and the context of Tetsudo’s message were totally irrelevant.

It was about Jinta's ability to see Meiko.

Meiko wanted Jinta, herself, and everyone from Super Peace Busters to fulfil her wish.

She also said she wanted Jinta to explain everything to everyone , so she decided to let everyone gather at McDonalds at afternoon.

"Is Yadomi even doing this for real?"

"I think so. When we saw him last time, didn't he dash around, calling Menma, Menma?"

"That's far from good. I feel that his personality, even his eyes, changed. But, to let us gather here…what is he scheming?"

"Let him do whatever he want. Let's hear what's he going to say. He changed so lot in just less than five years, don't you think this is funny?"

"I don't have such kind of interest."

"I think it's very funny."

Chiriko peeped at his black-hearted friend drinking coffee, and lightly squinted her eyes.

"How anticipating."

It was a playful tone, yet his eyes were dead serious. Only his mouth was smiling…how black-hearted. Right, from that day on, Chiriko had always been looking at Atsumu's fake smiling face.

(If you couldn't smile, it would be fine if you don't.)

The door of the entrance opened. The staff said, with a small nasal sound and the tone of anime characters, 'Welcome'.

"…"

(Ahah…There was another face devoid of smile.)

"Oh. That's…"

"Anjo?"

Naruko, who had entered the store, went to the table without even greeting them. When she went to pick something to eat, she felt her whole back extremely tense.

Having got her coke and fries, she grudgingly soothed her face and trudged to them.

"Hello."

With that being said softly, she found a seat beside Chiriko and sat on it.

"I didn't even recognise you at first. You've changed quite a lot."

With a fake smile on his face, Atsumu looked all over Naruko bluntly.

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean literally."

Naruko averted her eyes and looked around the restaurant. Her eyes was obviously searching for 'him'.

"When did he stop going to school?"

"Why are you asking me?"

"Isn't it normal to ask you? You guys study in the same high school."

"…"

"Can't you persuade him? After all, aren't friends friends regardless of age?"

Looking at Atsumu smiling badly, Chiriko knew what he had been thinking—indeed, he had been very aware of the song the restaurant was playing.

At this time, Naruko thought while she drank her coke.

(What a displeasing guy.)

Five years were such a long and imaginable time. And having met these two people after five years, she felt they were the same as they look—as displeasing as the uniform of their school they were wearing. Nevertheless, she didn't have a strong feeling of discomfort to idle around with them.

Compared to those friends she would always chat with, she didn't have to pretend her look and actions when she was with them.

Why was this? Only this point discomforted her.

(Yadomi…Would he really come?)

Naruko received Tetsudo's message while she was strolling around with her new friends.

When she saw the message, she wanted to cry.

(Actually…there isn't a need for me to be here.)

She took a piece of french fries and threw it in her mouth.

Among McDonald's french fries, there would always be a few abnormally delicious 'french fries deity'. The surface was crispy, yet the inside was so soft it would melt apart, as if having the taste of the fried french fries of expensive and high-ranking French restaurants, though she hadn't eaten them.

Most of the other french fries were dry, which was good, but that sensation of having a chance to eat the 'french fries deity' was beyond words. Should one be unfortunate, perhaps there wouldn't be any one of them in a pack of fries.

The one Naruko randomly took was the 'French fries deity', but …

(…Mmm)

The Naruko today couldn't bluntly enjoy its sensation. How rare it was for her to meet a 'french fries deity'…

Silence swiftly engulfed the three who hadn't seen each other for ages.

That day, their brains came back to their senses.

"Jintan…Do you like Menma?"

"Tell the truth. Super Peace Busters should not hide things from each other."

"Who would like such an ugly girl!"

After so many times of trying to remember that piece of memory, some diversion as occurred. That diversion would change according to the view of different people.

Nevertheless, the soft smile Meiko had on her face after being said by Jinta as an 'ugly girl' was almost the same in all three of their memories.

They hadn't forgot this scene all these five years.

Should they be careless, this scene would rush into their hearts.

When they thought of it, they would feel like suffocating, and some part of their body would feel cramped and folded into a ball.

So they tried not to touch that memory…but why…

Why did he have to deliberately pull out that memory and its henceforth pain?

“Ohyoohyoo. Ohyoo!”

Following the opening sound of the automatic door was a loud greeting. Everyone could tell who he was instantly—and also the person standing beside Tetsudo…

The three of them looked at him reluctantly. They raised their heads slowly out of hesitation.

This was some reason that differed among them.

I entered the store with my flip-flop. I could see that the Super Peace Busters were already waiting for me at a corner in the restaurant.

Yesterday I saw Atsumu I had never seen for a long time. He was sitting opposite to Anjo and Tsurumi. They didn't seem to have talked much.

“Ohyo ohyo. Ohyooo!” Tetsudo greeted them without paying any heed to the atmosphere. The people inside slightly lifted their heads.

“I still have work to do after this,” Anjo said, displeased greatly.

Completely the opposite, Matsuyuki looked in a very good mood.

He said with a smile, “I heard you’re looking for Menma? She appeared in front of you so uneasily, but she’s lost again?”

“Ah…” I couldn’t say a word back.

Tsurumi glared at Matsuyuki, tilting her eyes. Anjo was playing around with something that was decorating her nails…indeed, this scene utterly deviated from what Tetsudo said about everyone being serious for love.

“Oh, Anaru, you bought some fries?”

Anjo, with a bored face, vibrantly lifted her head the first time.

“Don’t call me like that!”

“Why? Anaru is Anaru!”

Tetsudo’s speech was coherent to Menma’s opinion.

“We haven’t seen for such a long time. Give me some fries. I want the salty one!”

Neglecting Tetsudo’s idiotic speech, Matsuyuki slightly tilted his body to the table.

“Let’s get back to business…Yadomi, did Menma said she wanted to fulfil a wish?”

“Ah…”

“Stop speaking, Matsuyuki. You’re being too black-hearted.”

"Why should I? I'll also be helping. I will also help fulfil Menma 's wish. If I do that, maybe Menma would go back to your side?"

Abruptly, I discovered.

Although Matsuyuki used a swift tone from head to toe, there were no smile in his eyes. It was just a dead stare, prying onto how I would react.

"No, no…I've said that already. That was just my hallucination …so…"

"So, I've said I wanted to help. Please don't mind."

Why should I don't mind? This were the ravings of a shut-in. Why should you be so serious when speaking to me?

There wasn't even time to conclude an answer.

"Oh yeah! Then let us first find out Menma's wish!"

Tetsudo and Matsuyuki then started a meaningless and wavering discussion. "Menma wants to get yo's signature…she didn't get Bobobo's[12] special purse…she also wants to capture Dialga[13] in Nokemon[14]...oh, this may be it. How nice it was to reminisce these things. I started to think I could get motivated.

Nevertheless, the only ones motivated were the boys. Anjo stopped playing with her nails and used her teeth to bit lightly on them instead. When she was small, she had this kind of habit—she wouldn't care how much nail polish she would swallow when she

was in a bad mood. Tsurumi only drooped her head, starting at the table.

And I…only slightly opening my mouth, I can only, quite defeated, watch Matsuyuki and Tetsudo slowly coming to a conclusion of 'Menma's wish'.

"So we're going to let Nadomi play Nokemon!"

"Tsk!..." Suddenly being called, I lost my defence. And when they saw my blatant embarrassment…

"Is it too scary for you to get out of your home?"

Matsuyuki showed me a smile with an obvious malicious intent .

That col, high, and erect nose…let me even forget my impatience and anger. I could only think in my heart what a handsome guy he was.

"Anjo, you work in a game shop, right? Could you sell us cheaply that Nokemon game…it should be the diamond version."

"Why does it have to be me?"

"Tsurumi and I will be responsible to check the internet transactions to see if there is Bobobo's special purse. Tetsudo…you will be responsible for getting yo's signature. Remember to be quick."

"Eheh. Why is it me?"

“”You’re deciding thing on yourself,” Tsurumi reproached. But Matsuyuki only said playfully, “it’s decided.”

Then his thin lips bent into a new moon.

“Super Peace Busters are formed once again.”

And under Tetsudo’s strong request, we were forced to exchange our email addresses.

Save Tetsudo and I, other’s email address had all changed.

Then I had to go and fetch the game.

“Bother. Why do I have to…Ahah, this isn’t it either.”

In the storage room of the Chuuko game store, I was starting at Anjo who was looking for the Nokemon game.

Eh, she was so big. She had really grown a lot.

She was wearing a super-short skirt, so if anything were done to her, it was her own fault of wearing this outfit, I thought. However , when this woman speaks, anyone’s mood of masturbating would be gone…

Anjo, who retrieved the Nokemon game with much difficulty, carefully and attentively put the game card in the plastic bag, and handed it to me.

“Here. Four thousand and eight-hundred yen.”

"Four thousand…isn't this the same as the market price?"

"This is a game five years ago. It has appreciated for ages."

Feeling helpless, I payed and grudgingly stretched my hand to receive the plastic bag…but Anjo didn't loosen her grip, glaring at me.

"What are you scheming actually?"

"Hah?"

"Pulling a prank with a deceased person. You suck."

Bam, Anjo loosened the bag. The Nokemon game abruptly threw to my side, and Anjo turned away and left, striding away.

Pulling a prank with deceased person?

When my sense came back to me, I had already cried out at Anjo's back.

"You say I'm pulling a prank with Menma? Don't be ridiculous!"

Even I was freaked out by my own angry howl. Anjo stopped walking, and violently turned her body around as if she wanted to dash to me.

"The one being ridiculous is you, who can always carelessly say the name of a deceased person…"

"Don't say she's a deceased person!"

"It's all because of me!" Anjo cried out loud this time, her eyes welled with tears before I had noticed.

"It's all because of those words I said…that she would!"

Anjo lifted the back of her hand to wipe her tears. Some black colour from the mascara on her thick and distinct eyelashes smeared out.

"So Menma would…become…a deceased person."

"…"

I was speechless.

It wasn't your fault but mine…I wanted to answer this originally. However, when Anjo and I had the same thought, allowing Anjo's feelings to rush into mine in these years, making me unable to act under this doubled heaviness.

Anjo was leaving, the bad-quality high-heeled shoes making walking sounds. While I listened in silence, I thought, perhaps…if Menma didn't come to my place but Anjo's, it was also appropriate and right.

There were only the dim flashes of the screen of the video game in the darkness.

There were croaking sounds of the frogs outside the window. In synch with these croaking sounds, I pressed on the buttons mechanically like a machine.

Go, Pikachu[15].

What the hell am I doing—playing Nokemon.

The adorable enemies had round, watery eyes. I attacked them repeatedly to weaken them as much as possible, and then I threw a Nokemon ball at them to catch them as my companion.

What feelings do they have?

Having been punched the hell out of them for no reason, and now enticed to become friends by sweet words, and also have to be trapped in a dark, small place.

Stuffed in a backpack, brought everywhere, and had to go outside and fight when suddenly someone said, 'go!'…Would they really take these inhumane players as true companions or friends? I was uncertain.

Besides, what are friends actually?

At that time, everyone in Super Peace Busters were certainly friends.

We cried out nicknames at each other, played till the sun drop—we were certainly friends according to the conventions.

I was the captain, and everyone followed me everywhere.

Everyone would gladly accept any suggestion I make…but in fact, perhaps they hated this; they hated listening to my orders.

Menma.

Anjo too…she cried today because she thought of Menma. She really wanted to apologise to Menma.

However, Menma only appeared in front of me.

Perhaps I was the only one, at that time, to have the sense of belonging as a leader—maybe this was reason.

On the game screen, Pikachu hit the enemy with thunderbolt. The enemy twitched as it was electrified. What a super effect that was.

With some hesitation, I threw out a Nokemon ball and easily caught the enemy.

Chapter 7 : The Night of Meiko

This was the second night Meiko had come back.

Quietly, she looked at a distance in the dark without blinking. Those eyes were more sullen than the dark. In that illusory void lay every feeling she could think of for Meiko.

Meiko always acted against the fact that she had been forgotten.

She always held onto a place in her heart, with an out of tone voice—she would pay all her effort and strength in her prayers.

So, her wish was a lie.

Meiko complained—let the liar disappear. Let her reveal her true self under the sunlight.

However, she failed to even put this into words and speak them out.

She could only let others to decide what kind of girl she was. She couldn't enforce her own wishes on others.

For she was this kind of a girl…

So until now, she was still here, not yet disappeared, and continued to stare at a distance. And with the flow of time, her contours became even clearer.

And thus Meiko continued to grow.

Then, her hair fluttered in the night wind.

Frog croaks sounded from the darkness.

“Croak…”

She started to imitate the croaking of the frogs. Nevertheless, frogs don’t actually ‘croak’. Instead, they make a sound like some kind of instrument…a sound that only frogs could make.

From when did people think that frogs ‘croak’?

(It’s so tiring…)

She only wanted to say it, even though she wasn't clear whether she was really tired.

Menma had been strolling everywhere today, walking here and there. She seemed to be hungry, yet she wasn't clear of this fact.

Time flew past in such a slow pace.

In the morning, the sky would turn light blue, in the afternoon a blue mixed with white, then gradually mixed with red, in the night dark blue, and finally pitch black.

Menma saw this change of colours by gazing head high to the sky at different places.

There were a lot of things Menma knew in these places; however, there wasn't anything she was very clear. Every single thing changed here or there.

“I really want to meet everyone.”

Menma mumbled, trying to stop the tears that welled in her eyes from overflowing.

I couldn't face my family. I was so scared I could only look into the distance, not daring to get any closer. I must admit I wasn't in any case scared when I saw Jintan and the others.

I hope my family could forget me, but I hope everyone in the Super Peace Busters wouldn't.

This feeling I dwell on is the same—be it Menma or Meiko.

Chapter 8 : My Dear Menma

“Wu…Yeah. At last, I caught it!!”

The room was still as dark and quiet as ever, so quiet I could hear the ticking sounds of the clock…a day had already passed.

For twenty-three hours, from morning to night, I hadn't eaten anything.

I had finally caught Dialga[16]. With all my strength, the intelligence of an adult, and the help of rare books and technology, I had finally caught it.

But of course I didn't feel bad for playing games all day long, for recently I got through every day the same way or the other. Speaking of this, Matsuyuki was witty about letting me to take up this job of playing Nokemon.

In short, I mailed Hisakawa a message about this. I have no need to report to Matsuyuki. He wasn't the captain anyway.

‘Dialga Capture: Success’

That was all I wrote and sent. Let me eat something…I think there was still some round bread in the fridge…I thought about it.

“Mmm?”

My phone rang: it was a message.

I hadn’t ever contacted with my dad over mailing, let alone friends. So for that moment I couldn't figure out who the sender was.

It was Hisakawa. I opened it and looked…

“Menma Found. Catching Failed.”

My mind went black for a moment: I couldn’t comprehend.

Inhaling deeply, I looked at the mail again. Then, I couldn't help but cry out in alarm.

“Menma…found?!”

No sooner had I finished speaking than my neck was hooked all of a sudden. My upper body shook, my breathing difficult.

“What? Did you call for Menma?!”

“!!”

It was a honey-sweet voice. I slowly called upon all the senses in my body to confirm the situation I was in.

Clinging on my neck was a white small wrist. My ears could feel a warm and milky breathing sensation…

“Ah…ah. Ah…”

I couldn't move.

Compared to feeling surprised, I felt gladder; compared to feeling glad, I felt…what was it? My nose was bloated. If I were to turn my head now I was sure I would cry.

Yesterday we met so sudden I couldn't fix in my mind on what had happened. But after some time now, I had time to think and clear things up…even if it all happened out the blue, I could accept it in some sense.

This is another chance that I met Menma…I-am-here-.

“Hey. Jintan?”

I could sense Menma’s glare me at my face. She hung her head on my shoulders, looking at me with her aqua-blue eyes. I could even feel the colour of her eyes.

There was something I had always wanted to do and that I had practiced for numerous times. That was right…First, I would have to start from here.

“Jin-tan? Are you hearing what I’m saying…Ah!”

I loosened off Menma’s hand, and sat uprightly, facing directly to her.

Then, I gradually straightened my right arm.

“Heh?” Astonished, Menma’s adorable expression reflected upon my retina, inducing the vigorous thumping of my heart. Nevertheless, I had to do this and I couldn't stop. I put my right hand on my forehead.

That was the pose ‘my dear Menma’ that I had repeated many times!

“M…my. M…my dear!!”

This was the best moment I could unveil the ‘my dear Menma’ after all these years!

“Yooh, ayoo, thank you for waiting everybody!”

“…eh?”

I froze. The ‘my dear Menma’ I wanted to say for years was interrupted just like that. Menma laughed out loud.

“That line yo, wasn't wrong yo—it was wrong, yo![17] You have to say it like this: say it with your hand curled like a cone and place it in front of your mouth!”

Menma started to repeatedly perform that yo line. I had always thought that my ‘my dear Menma’ could win that yo thing…

“Indeed…I couldn't win over it.”

“Eheh?”

My apology failed. However, Menma’s smiling face warmed my heart bit by bit.

“Ahahahah?!”

Menma suddenly spotted the Nokemon on the quilt.

“That’s Dialga! That’s brilliant! When did you start playing that, Jintan?!”

Menma was ranting out loud, her eyes flashing with beam.

I had captured the Dialga, yet Menma was still here.

It seemed I had messed up her wish. Nevertheless, it was a wish that I thought so myself, not what Menma had actually meant.

Menma glared at the Nokemon with concentration. “Here. This shoulder place that is bulged is so cool!” She said to herself on and on, overflowing with joy.

Perhaps it was only a hallucination. Nevertheless, the Menma in front of me was truly the Menma I knew. It was the Menma that would be threw off in ecstasy by a Dialga.

So, I made a promise quietly.

“I would certainly help you fulfill your wish.”

“Yeah? That’s too soft. What did you say? Can you say it again? ”

“…No. Yo.”

Chapter 9 : She Appeared

Sleeping deeply on the bed, Menma breathed repeatedly with the same pattern. The cheap sofa had a hard texture, sticking my skin, driving me difficult to sleep in a place I wasn't used to. I looked closely at Menma's ear, letting my imaginations go wild: This visualisation was too refined and was of too high a quality for a hallucination—did I have a talent for a model designer?

Another thought than ran through my mind here and there was the fact that I was alone in a room with a girl. Since she was a hallucination, then it would be fine if I slightly touch her. This couldn't be counted as a crime. No! You couldn't be having bad thoughts toward Menma! As you are I, I couldn't let you have such thoughts…what a meaningless thinking combat. Sleeping sweatily on a sofa made with artificial leather, hearing the buzzing sounds of summer insects as well as Menma's breathing…this was all too real. As I pondered back and forth, I got through a blazingly, burning hot night.

"Jintan. Good morning!"

"Mmm…wa?!"

At last, I fell asleep unconsciously after all that effort, now I was woken up by that bluntly weight on my stomach—it was Menma.

"The weather is so fine! An hour in the morning is worth two in the evening, right?"

"Ah…"

The sunlight scattered behind Menma as she softly smiled. Her innocent glow lashed on my sleepy mind.

She was the hallucination I made, an illusion. Although I wanted to keep a distance from this ridiculous 'real thing', I seemed not too resistant in the depths of my heart.

Nevertheless, it was a lie to say I completely didn't want to resist. But staying with Menma like this would kill away my fear.

Because she was really…adorable.

"…Wu."

"Eh? Jintan. What's going on? Your face looks terrible."

"I am terrible!!"

Ding dong ding dong, ding dong.

At this moment, the doorbell, which malfunctioned because of poor contact, rang in an over-spirited rhythm.

"Eh, a guest?"

An over-spirited…seems like a person.

"Right!"

Abruptly remembering the email Hisakawa sent last night, I opened my phone and checked once again…the content of the email was…

"What…Eh?!"

Menma spied on my phone from aside.

"Wuagh!" I bended my body, trying to hide it in reflex, but it was too late. Menma's eyes were beaming with radiance.

"That's incredible! That's incredible, Jintan!"

"Hah? Incredible? You…"

"You already have your own phone! That's incredible! It's like being an adult!"

So she was talking about *that*.

Menma seemed to have missed what the email was about. Probably, it was before she came back here…

"Let me ask you, Menma…"

"Yeah?"

"Have you went to Hisakawa's place?"

No sooner had I finished speaking than Menma's eyes became even brighter, even five times greater than the time she saw my phone.

"Hah? Hisakawa, you mean Poppo? Waghh…Menma haven't seen Poppo yet!!"

"Mmm…" Perhaps I shouldn't have said this.

"Ne, Jintan! I want to go to Poppo's place. I really want to!"

I want to…I want to…I want to...as if chanting a spell, Menma violently shook my shoulders…

"All right."

"Wuaghhh!"

Looking at the naïve and joyful Menma with my eyes slanted, I could feel that somewhere near my stomach became a bit turbulent . Such being the case, what could have possibly caused Menma's appearance?

Did Hisakawa also see this Menma illusion?

Nevertheless, it wasn't strange, though it actually was a bit strange. Yet, Menma was here, though she surely was an illusion.

Accordingly, it is not totally inconceivable that others could also make such Menma illusions. Eh, of course this was impossible to understand for usual people.

However, however…

Ding dong ding dong, ding dong.

“Ah, it’s the guest again!”

I completely forgot that the doorbell was still ringing. Usually, I wouldn’t open the door even if there were a guest. But, now, perhaps because of some turbulence in my heart, I even dashed downstairs and opened the door in a hurry…

“Ahhahaha!”

I saw the back of a little kid dashing away.

No wonder it rang repeatedly.

“…”

My heart thumped.

There were irascible cicada’s buzzing sounds everywhere, the diminishing sounds of little kids, and the asphalt road which relfected the strong, bright sunlight…

“Wa. So it's bad kids.”

When I came back to my senses, Menma was already standing behind me.

The running kids somehow looked like us back then. Their backs, also…

Standing beside me was Menma, who had already grown up.

“Mmm? What’s the matter, Jintan?”

“No. Nothing.”

I had a feeling of my nose swelling up again.

I averted my eyes from Menma…

“…Then! My pee was drawing a strange sign, it should be the [18] sign! Then it really appeared!”

When I came to the secret base, Hisakawa excitedly began to explain things to me with his vigorous body language. From his look, I could tell he wasn’t lying, his actions were swift and light despite his heavy stance…

“Poppo?! Are you kidding me, is this Poppo?!”

Menma was even more excited than Hisakawa.

“Did you really see Menma?”

“Certainly! Maybe my trauma became more acute. This time I’ll also become cool!”

“Cool! Cool!”

Menma repeatedly recited the word ‘cool’ as if she really liked it , presenting this word to Hisakawa. But Hisakawa completely neglected Menma; or should I say, he wasn’t aware of her. Seemingly pleased, he then had a spur of the moment.

“Then, I had a surprising idea, do you want to know?”

“No. I don’t.”

“I want to know. I’m so eager to know!”

“Ah. It's my fault. Please. I’ll give you pocket money for you to spend.”

“Oh. Menma wants one-hundred-yan!”

To let this conversation between Menma, whom only I can see, and I to successfully continue, it looks like I’ll need much more practise.

“Spit it. What surprising idea do you have…”

“Oh! It’s that. That!”

Having that said, Hisakawa handed an ugly, doodled promotional leaflet to me.

“Heh…Let’s hold a big party for finding Menma before the summer break ends…?”

“Waaaa…Are we finding Menma?!”

'Enjoy the cool air and BBQ while finding Menma's wish. Let's speak to our hearts' content! Bring your own food!' was also written on it with ugly writings along with a very surprising illustration.

"Menma, enjoying the cool air, and BBQ…I don't get how it matches your theme."

"Don't mind that! It's only some minor details…it'll definitely be very lively. Don't you think it will be very fun?"

"Fun! Menma wants to find Menma!"

Menma seemd to be very happy, jumping here and there around Hisakawa.

"Even if you want to…everyone might not come…"

"They will! They came to Mcdonalds!"

Mmm…I was speechless, as they really did come.

Do those people have so much time to squander? Or should I say, do they really believe Menma's thing?

Anjo seemed, however, incredulous…

"Look. Wasn't I responsible for the 'yo' thing? However, I've been quite running out of money lately. If Menma's true wish is to get yo's signature…I want to see Menma and ask her whether she wants to change another wish!"

As Hisakawa spoke without stopping, Menma responded to him by saying, “Ayoo?! Wuaghh!”

It feels like I was being fooled around.

“I’m so anxious for the night, Jintan!”

On the way home, Menma looked elated. She incessantly kicked the small pebals on the road pointlessly.

“I didn’t say I would go.”

“Then, say you would go!”

“Hah?”

“Ah. Then, maybe this is the wish Menma wants to be fulfilled? Menma wants to have a look at Menma?”

“My, you’re so good at weaving reasons, blaming everything at your wish.”

Cocking her head and acting innocent, Menma said, “Mmm?” Hell, I’m getting furious.

How can such a person have such an adorable face?

I hated my own potentials of a model designer. Were I to make it more ugly, I wouldn’t have to be fooled around by her…

“Maybe I still will.”

"Yeah?"

"No. Nothing."

"Ne, ne. Jintan's always saying, 'no, nothing.' Is Jintan from a planet of naught?"

"…"

"Ah, right, BBQ, What should we bring? Menma likes German sausages. I want German sausages!"

As Menma, who can fool me around even without an adorable face, repeated her request, I gave in and said in a soft voice, forcing my last struggle.

"I think Japanese sausages are better."

"Eeehh?!"

Chapter 10 : BBQ

"They're coming! Welcome to the fascinating place for buddies!! "

Under the shadows of the trees, the dark and thick smoke induced from the BBQ rose in spirals, covering the area.

Hisakawa was holding a circular fan, and his head was wrapped with a towel. Anjo and Tsurumi had already come. It was an ardous mystery of why we could gather so easily. Do they really have no friends at all? I couldn't help unnecessarily worrying for them.

"Heheh, I've prepared the grill! A man lent it to me at my workplace!"

"Food? I only brought some German sausages…"

"I brought candles."

"Heh?"

"Candles."

Tsurumi brought a shopping bag in front. It was a heavy bag, and as she had said, it was filled with fragant candles.

"Aren't we calling upon Menma? These props used in spiritual stories should be essential."

"Ah. Oh…Then, where's the food for BBQ?"

"I don't really eat in the night. Don't care for me."

She was overly having her own way in doing things. Nevertheless, this was Tsurumi, she was like this before, but it didn't seem this serious back then?

"Hey. Tsuruko-san only cares for herself. Oh but willful woman are of my liking!"

"What an idiot."

"Ah. Because I thought everyone would bring food, and I was afraid I would buy repeated things, so…"

Seemed a bit embarrassed, Anjo opened the plastic bag she was holding on. Inside the bag was a cheap set of fireworks.

"Uh. What do you want to do with this?"

"Playing with fireworks? We aren't children anymore."

"What?!"

"Calm down, calm down, calm down! Everyone, settle down. We can stuff ourselves full with this!"

Having that said, Hisakwa opened the lid next to the grill. Inside was some bubbling, slimy liquid.

"This is called Kiru. It's a sweet congee made of milk and rice!"

With her eyes gleaming, Menma looked at the liquid, speaking in astonishment, “Wa! It looks like vomit!”

“Don’t say such things that will spoil our appetite.”

I carelessly continued what Menma had said. With a “uh?”, Anjo looked at me surprisedly. And I quickly evaded her eyes in panic.

“All in all, this couldn’t be counted as a barbecue.”

“Should I make this into a teppanyaki[19]?”

“I’m good with just German sausages.”

Consequently, the ‘Menma Finding Meeting’ started at last.

Anjo was cutting the sausages.

Tsurumi was randomly placing candles between trees. And Hisakawa was regulating the fire of the oven.

We didn’t even speak, except for the ‘how are you doing’ shouts by Hisakawa from time to time. Nevertheless, out of my expectation, there was some kind of noiseness.

That was because of Menma.

Just then, Menma was going from here to there between people, asking ‘the sausages had to be cut to little crabs!’, or ‘Poppo, the fire is huge! It’s a big poppo, big poppo[20]!!”

This noisiness covered the sense of disharmony among us who hadn't worked together for ages.

It was a bit forced, lonely noisiness.

For the only one to hear this noisiness was I. Save I, no one could hear Menma.

"Hey, Yadomi."

"Hah!"

When Tsurumi suddenly invited me to a conversation, my stomach twitched. Though from appearance, Anjo and Hisakwa had changed, for some reason, I thought Tsurumi was the person with the biggest change.

"You said you saw Menma…that Menma had come back. Are you speaking the truth?"

"Um? If you don't believe it, why are you still coming?"

"Yeah? Because I want to find you for the answer."

Tsurumi said peacefully. She didn't look at me while she spoke, so what hid behind her eyes, including those feelings, I didn't have that faintest idea…

""What do you want to find me for…"

Rustle!

"!?"

There was a lot of noise at the woods behind. Everyone looked at the source of the sound, and they saw some white light shining out of the crevices between the trees.

I could almost hear who was gulping. At this moment, my mind became blank: is this…

"Menma?"

But Menma is at my side? When I murmured in my subconscious…

"Yo."

Walking out from there, Matsuyuki lightly waved his hand.

"Eh…What, so it was Yukiatsu!!"

The tense atmosphere softened at an instant. Tsurumi seemed to have closed her eyes slightly.

"I brought some steak and also a few varieties of vegetables. There are also spice and olive oil…"

"Oh yeah! You're surely Yukiatsu! You're completely different from those useless women!"

"What are you saying?!"

Listening to Hisakawa and Anjo's quarrel, I heaved a sigh. The other Menma…I could really believe in such a thing—how dumb.

Yes. No one, save Hisakawa, would believe in Menma's existence…

"Ah. But you really freaked me out! I thought Menma would really run out…"

"If you're talking about Menma, I saw her just a while ago."

Matsuyuki said something astonishing with a light-hearted tone . His tone was so natural that one couldn't even notice what he was saying.

"Menma?!"

But Hisakawa caught his words that were drifting away.

If you're talking about Menma, I saw her just a while ago.

"What?"

"Heh? Menma is here?"

I couldn't help turning around to look at Menma, who was looking at me too. Yes. Menma was here. The thing was…

"You're lying!"

"Really? Where's her? Where's Menma?"

"There. At the lawn."

"Waah! So there's another Menma…let's go have a look, Jintan!!"

Menma had already dashed away. "Ah…" at the moment of my hesitation, Hisakawa raced behind her frantically.

"Wuaghh! Menma, wait for me! I'll give you some German sausages!"

"Ah, Wait!"

"Hey."

There was an icy voice behind my back, freezing my steps that were about to leave. The corner of Matsuyuki's mouth showed a soft smile.

"Seems that it isn't only you who can see Menma."

"What?!"

What was his smile supposed to mean?

Matsuyuki…did you…did you really see Menma…?

"Hey. Jintan! Let's quickly find her!"

"Ah. Okay!"

Being hurried by Hisakawa, I also ran away. Since some time I was unaware of, the sweat covering on my skin had splitted apart like a film: one layer that belonged to others, and one mine. Every kind of sophisticated feeling was sticked on my body like glue, making me maximally displeased.

Chapter 11 : Labyrinth in the Dark Woods

"Menma. Where are you!!"

As he called for Menma, Tetsudo thought, it would be great if Jinta could sing with him…but this wish, sadly, cannot be granted.

Jinta and Naruko were gone already.

Sigh, this is great already, Tetsudo thought. To have Jinta still willing to mention Menma was already the greatest of all.

Back then Jinta was everyone's leader.

Jinta was also the one who brought Tetsudo, with a thin and small body, and dumb, into Super Peace Busters. Jinta was very smart, and he excelled in sports, like a glittering hero. He would also speak to Tetsudo with a smile as brilliant as sunflowers in the summer.

"Your nickname...because you're called Tetsudo…let's call you Poppo!"

Poppo. This nickname to Tetsudo, who was often neglected in the class, was undoubtedly a new name that signified a fresh start.

He knew about Jinta's unattendance in high school.

But he thought this unimportant. There are many more things out there in the world, and Jinta could see them.

Then, when they met again after five years, Jinta completely assented his idea.

He said Menma's name once again.

This was more important than anything to Tetsudo. It didn't matter if Menma truly existed or was just a hallucination.

Something that had always been clinging to 'Menma' in Jinta's heart was being brought out. And as such, the Super Peace Busters gathered together again.

Jinta was indeed still everyone's captain. From Tetsudo's perspective, he was the strongest and eternal hero.

He just wanted to cry out loud—to cry out loud in his heart the name of Menma.

"Menma. Menma!"

As Tetsudo cried, Menma also followed him and cried. This name, Menma, reverberated in the dark woods. The light coming from Tetsudo's flashlight reflected on Menma's chest, coagulating into a shadow.

Menma could, from Tetsudo's calling her own name, feel the happiness and joy of being one of the Super Peace Busters, albeit she shouldn't exist here. She was also afraid for herself now wasn't one of the Super Peace Busters.

Happy, yet afraid—it wasn't an even split: the happiness was the major part. After all, it was a joyful event to be with everyone here.

"Hey. Menma-san!!"

Tetsudo could call upon her name. This was indeed some source of her happiness.

"Menma!!"

Meiko also cried, cryiny out without attention something sunk deep in her heart, and spewing it out.

"Haah…Haah."

As Naruko ran, she thought wanderingly.

(Why would I follow them when I am wearing high-heel shoes …)

Every time she stepped on the uneven road, her high-heel shoes would sprain her ankle—*at least let me change into platform shoes*.

Not only her high-heel shoes but also her clothes and nails had been armed. A band with poor elasticity bound her ankle, giving her the feeling of being strapped tightly. She now could let her become more confident, stand before people, and face their eyes. She now could get along with her early-maturing friends without being timid…

Nevertheless, does she really need to arm herself in front of the Super Peace Busters? She didn't know.

Besides, she gradually forgot the reason why she was running. Naruko didn't believe in Jinta's words. In fact, everyone didn't. It was just Atsumu trying to tease Jinta, for he didn't like him from the very start. And Chiriko's thoughts were hard to understand no matter when. Back then she was already an early-maturing child who would look at things from a side imperturbably. And Tetsudo maybe…truly believed in him.

(But…even if this was the case, isn't this awful?)

The first one to propose was perhaps Jinta.

But if it wasn't Tetsudo who cohered to him, Atsumu who fanned the flames, and Chiriko who neglected it…the one being manipulated would actually be Jinta.

Right, Jinta was the real victim, Naruko thought in some part of her heart.

Although she threw a tantrum at Jinta at the workplace for his saying Menma's name, her anger wasn't simply because Jinta would say a deceased person's name so esaily, but also some subtle thoughts she had.

Jinta could see Menma.

If this was the truth—of course, the truth looking at it from some perspective—then every one in Little Peace Busters who had

been playing around with Jinta's feelings was unforgivable. This certainly included herself. She knew she shouldn't have joined in such a despiteful act.

But she would always let the people around her to affect her.

Jinta's back was fluttering in her eyes, and she want to cease his back. If she let him off, he would get hurt…why would he even bear such serious pain when he was already riddled with scars?

"Hey!"

Her shouting voice was louder than she expected. The face Jinta had when he turned his head, at that moment, always seemed to have a slight open in his lips…just like those days. Naruko's heart thumped greatly. She uttered quickly as she was afraid of the shame that her heartbeat would be heard.

"D-Don't you think that what we're doing are too dumb?"

(No…this wasn't it)

"You said you saw Menma. That was just Matsuyuki's joke…if you…if you stop mentioning Menma, then everyone can…"

(This wasn't what I wanted to say!)

The things she wanted to say in her heart and the things she spoke couldn't be in synch with her feelings. Perhaps it was just a slight deviation in her tone, but what that meant was completely different.

Jinta said in an obviously unhappy tone.

"Then why are you coming along?"

"That's because…"

Jinta stopped saying anything and left.

Undoubtedly, she didn't want to anger him. When Naruko stepped on to catch him, but for her unappropriate armour, her clothes scratched with something buldgy on the floor with a subtle angle.

"Ah?!"

She couldn't help screaming. She was about to fall, but right at the next instant…

"Anjo?!"

Jinta who had ran back in a few steps fiercely caught hold of Naruko's hands, catching her from the back.

Naruko's ears reddened…

"T-Thanks! Sor…"

"Stop kidding."

Naruko's words were interrupted with a low voice. It was a male voice that had undergone the adolescent change of voice.

(Yadomi's hands…are trembling?)

"Are you an idiot?"

At this moment did Naruko noticed that the ground she was stepping on was beside a dark and deep valley.

This was a scene she hadn't seen but had imagined for a few many times.

It was the place where Meiko's sandals floated.

"Yadomi…"

"If you really…not only Menma but you would also…"

The man's words gave her hears a hot sensation. The trembling hands that were grasping to her wrists…his tensed fingers…

"You've grown."

"Huh?"

Still unconscious, Naruko's body had lost the strength that had been holding onto her.

Merely this could puff out some sweetness in her heart and body…Maruko said along her light breathing patterns.

"Hey. Did you really, really see Menma?"

"Uh…"

"Actually, you really like Menma, right?"

"What?!" Jinta came back to his senses, and violently let go of Naruko's wrists, but Naruko still continued, "because you really like her, so you would see things that actually didn't exist…"

"You, you…."

Ascribed to Jinta's waver, a hot, damp feeling shot from the bottom of her eyes.

She didn't believe it, but…

"Um...if you can see Menma, then take good care of her. Although I don't know why, I ask for your help…"

"Anjo…"

His words completely matched her feelings. It was not only for Meiko but also Jinta…she also hoped she could treat her gently.

Some warmth of Jinta's palm still remained on Naruko's wrist, sticking to her skin like a scar. She thought herself as useless for becoming so heated up just because of some contact with him.

Without even blinking, Chiriko looked at Atsumu roasting the meat he brought. The steak needs to be turned over, otherwise it would be burnt, Chiriko thought. Atsumu who looked steay was surely preoccupied.

However, she didn't remind him. She wanted to let him experience the failure of burning it.

"Ah."

The colour of the smoke changed. Atsumu who frantically turned the meat gave out a small cry.

"Indeed. You rarely cook, yet you brought these things to act cool."

Atsumu groaned.

"I think it's bad for you to speak in a way as if you have seen through people."

"Where's it bad?"

"You won't be popular among boys."

"Thanks for your care."

Among the Super Peace Busters, only Atsumu and Chiriko still had a friendly relation. Although they said everyone had good feelings and never left each other, but in this group, there are disparities in how strong the feelings are. And at that time, the weakest feelings perhaps belonged to Atsumu and Chiriko.

What was Atsumu thinking? Chiriko was thinking. If she could see through him…at some level she knew how Atsumu thought, but when she wanted to have a deeper look, the focus would be lost, and everything would beome blurry.

As their ages grew and as the distance of a friend grew, she gradually couldn't see what a person Atsumu is. Every now and then at this moment, Chiriko would increase the prescription of her glasses.

If she could see through him…

"Stop messing around."

"Huh?"

Chiriko couldn't reply to Atsumu's soft words.

That, you see, was because she couldn't look through him again .

Atsumu lifted his head.

Along with the burnt meat and the roasted smoke, the flames of the candles swayed in the gloomy greyness, shining upon Tetsudo and the others who came back dismayed of failing to find Menma.

Jinta and Naruko was a bit of a distance apart…

"What. Menma's not here! Yukiatsu!"

"…"

Atsumu stared straightly at Jinta.

Beside him was Meiko, who had been making him flighty and impetuous. Of course, Atsumu wasn't aware of Meiko's presence.

"Hey. Yukiatsu. Is the meat roasted?"

Meiko called Atsumu by his nickname.

The honey-sweet voice he longed was near him, yet Atsumu wasn't aware of this. He just plainly stared at Jinta.

Jinta didn't go to school. His hair had grown, but his height wasn't much different. Still, he had a cool feeling.

Perhaps it was the truth, or perhaps it was just an effect of past memory that Jinta appeared like this in Atsumu's eyes, however the reason…

(He was repugnant.)

Atsumu glared at Jinta. Noticing Atsumu's eyes, Jinta also glared back at him, but he didn't stay for so long and soon averted his eyes.

(I won…)

I had to make out the winner and the loser like a kid, but why?

Why do I have no such feeling of winning—why was this?

"Hey. The precious meat are burnt!"

"The second round is coming. Wait for a moment."

As I looked at Matsuyuki Matsuyuki sprinkled the salt and pepper on the meat, I threw into my mouth those crab-sized German sausages thoughtlessly.

It had been some time already and the cold German sausages taste oily.

How repugnant…everything, including this damp night, was repugnant.

Matsuyuki was roasting some other meat expresionlessly.

He said he saw Menma…with such calmness.

Undoubtedly, he must have lied to us. What was he planning—how useless. If he were to play an act, at least play to the end…

"Speaking of which, you've gone too far, Yukiatsu! You act so calm and refuse to come with us…"

"Uh?"

Matsuyuki stopped his hand that was turning the meat, and said lightly and peacefully, "When Menma appeared in front of me, she asked me to tell us to stop messing around."

"Uh…?"

Matsuyuki was staring at me, with that smile that only belonged to the corner of his mouth—he was trying me again with those disgusting eyes.

"Eh? Did Menma say this?"

Standing beside me, Menma cocked her head in astonishment.

So this was the case…what was he planning—that bastard.

He joined this BBQ just to scoff at me? And bought so expensive meat just for this?

"Taking her wish as an excuse to capriciously fool around is perhaps just giving trouble to Menma."

Matsuyuki looked at me, seemingly wanting to continue.

"Stop, Matsuyuki!"

Everyone had noticed Matusyuki's intention, and Anjo looked even more unstable than Matsuyuki or I.

"Menma wouldn't want this to happen, right? Five years have already past, yet we're still reluctant to leave."

"Oi, Yukiatsu, you…!"

"Mmm.."

"I am already introspecting myself. Although I carelessly joined Yadomi in this, Menma would definitely feel unhappy for this."

"…"

"Yadomi. You're such a poor thing. Menma's not here, and you don't even go to school. How deplorable…"

"Jintan!"

Menma stared at me with her round eyes.

I had already become a sandbag. I don't care what you say.

"But, when you do such senseless things, the real one who's poor isn't you but Menma…"

I couldn't understand Matsuyuki's feelings. Did he hate me because I said that to Menma that day?

"That's wrong!!"

I looked at Menma.

Menma shook her head potently—not to me but everyone.

"That's wrong! Who's poor…Although Menma don't understand, and don't know why I would be here…there are many, many scary things out there and many places I'm not sure of, but…!"

When I came to my senses, Menma had already been crying.

Her face was cried to a mess, and her fists tightly clenched.

"When everyone could gather together…when everyone could think of Menma's things, this was undoubtedly the reason of my happiness!"

"Ah!"

"Hey. Yadomi. You should forget about Menma already. Stop letting her stuck in your mind…"

"No! That's nonesense…that's nonesense!"

Her voice couldn't reach Matsuyuki's ears, yet she still continued to rebuke him.

"Even if Menma died…Menma still hopes everyone could be good friends! So…"

As if casting off her tears, Menma vibrantly lifted her head.

"So, stop quarreling for Menma!!"

"Hey. You."

"Uh…Yadomi?"

Hey. You—I carelessly let it slip off my mouth.

Stop quareling…stop qaurreling for Menma. Do you have to worry for us to this date?

Your will was drivelled by others, your denying unheard, and your words unable to be sent.

Aren't you the one who was hurt the most?

"Heh…It seems like you have something to say, Yadomi?"

Matsuyuki wore a provocative smile.

I had to say something.

"Ah…ah…"

What I wanted to say were beyond numbers.

However, the words seemed to be stuck firmly on the depths of my throat. No matter what I say, I would be reckoned as an idiot.

I don't want this to happen.

This wasn't because I lost my qualification as a leader, for I didn 't care about that thing long ago.

This was because Menma was here. Perhaps she was only my hallucination, but she was, in fact, here, and her eyes were welled with tears, her shoulders trembling. I didn't want her to scoff at me .

No matter what I say, Matsuyuki would want to destroy me elatedly, however, his pain, or should I say, my pain, would hurt Menma even more. So…

"Hey. Yadomi. What's the matter? You don't have anything to say now?"

"That's enough! Yukiatsu!!"

At the moment Hisakawa wanted to grab Matsuyuki by the arm …

"…"

Menma suddenly ran as if she had made her mind.

"Uh…?"

She ran to the bag of fireworks Anjo had put on the floor, and stretched her hand inside…

"Believe in me!" As she cried, she tore off the wrapper.

"Uh?!"

Everyone wasn't aware of it at the start.

But when I started to scream, they followed the direction of my eyes and lost their ability to speak like I.

"What?!"

"Ehhhh?!"

Having found their voices, they made an extremely normal voie of people who met summer ghost stories first-handedly.

In front of my eyes, Menma opened the fireworks and took out a piece. I could see her, but they…

"What's that? Why is the firework rod moving by itself?"

"Hey, Yadomi! Stop joking, what mechanism is this?"

Even Matsuyuki had a tensed face, his voice going crazy.

"Stop playing around…Stop it, Menma!!"

Actually I noticed this from the start. Menma could touch anything. Could hallucinations touch things? No, it didn't matter whether it was a hallucination now.

If that was the case, then the evidence of Menma's existence are limitless.

But I didn't want that to happen.

Menma had been our pal. Even now, she was our pal. She had the same soft smile she had at that time. She would always say 'yo' or 'bobobo' like a kid.

It was the spirit that was right for the summer…I didn't want to let the Super Peace Busters to look at her like that.

"Menma!!"

But Menma didn't stop. She didn't care whether they would be scared of her, or mistook her. She lightly put the rod in her hand near the candles Tsurumi had prepared for the spirit stories.

Seee…

Following the striking sound as fast as bubbles in soft drinks, the leading-line of the rod was ignited.

"!!"

In front of everyone, Menma swung her rod through the air.

The light's trace pierced through the darkness.

It brought back the memories of that summer.

Everyone added their pocket money together and bought some fireworks. For children were restricted from playing fire, they would want to do it more when they are restricted, as they would become excited when doing bad things. Therefore, everyone waited for the sky to darken.

It was the same on that day: the rod was ignited with a 'seee' sound like the bubbling of soft drinks. Looking at the fiery rod, everyone cried out in joy.

"Wuagh! Excellent, Jintan! It's round! Round!"

We were indeed children. Looking merely at the fascinating fire rod wasn't fun. We swung the fire rod around and drew endless

light traces in the dark. I swiftly twisted my wrist and drew a few circles in mid-air, and when Menma saw me doing this…

"Guess what this is!"

She swung her fire rod and drew a strange figure.

"What's that, eight?"

"Ah, is that infinity?"

Tsurumi was right. Menma nodded her head in happiness.

"That's right. It's the symbol for infinity!"

"Eheh. What's infinity?"

"Don't you know, Popo? Infinity is the meaning for on and on till forever."

Menma nodded again to Matsuyuki's explanation.

"That's it! This is us—the Super Peace Busters!"

And then, she suddenly wore a smiling face.

"It means that we are best friends for on and on till forever!!"

"…Menma."

A flower was drawn by the traces of the fire rod in the darkness.

This flower was made by the repeated swinging of Menma's fire rod, repeatingly telling us the meaning of 'best friends'.

"Ah…"

Everyone who was originally scared…looked at it and started to remember the things at that time; their faces also relieved.

It wasn't the face of seeing summer ghost stories first-handedly.

It wasn't simply astonishment and puzzlement.

"It's really…Menma."

Just when Anjo murmured in her subconscious…

"…Who's kidding!!"

When Matsuyuki roared, Menma's actions stopped.

"Yukiatsu…?"

"Who's kidding? What is this? I don't believe it! I will never believe it!"

Matsuyuki's roaring sounds reverberated in the dark woods.

His fretful and restless footsteps left gradually. No one stopped him: everyone only listened quietly to his leaving footstep sounds.

Matsuyuki's voice disappeared. The buzzing sounds of summer insects dominated nearby places again, but everyone was still silent.

This silence represented everyone believed in Menma. This silence declared this truth with the loudest voice.

The fire rod in Menma's hand had burnt to the end while we weren't noticing.

"Jintan."

Menma smiled to me. It was the same unsightly, acidulous smile she had on that day.

"Sorry."

She apologised to me for a reason I didn't know.

Chapter 12 : The Common Trauma

Zip zip…

In the secret base, the insects flew around the lamp, making flapping sounds—this was the only sound in this quite room.

Tetsudo, Chiriko, and Naruko didn't make a sound. Atsumu had left. Jinta and Meiko had also left.

Jinta left with Meiko?

For they witnessed the drawing of the fire rod, this unprecedented experience, they believed in Meiko's existence.

However, as time passed, they began to be uncertain. They was skeptical of whether what they saw was authentic.

"Menma…Is she really out there?" Naruko commenced with a slightly trembling voice Chiriko replied, "do you know what mass hallucinations are?"

"Mass hallucinations?"

"It is because we have the same trauma that we saw the same thing."

The same trauma—Chiriko's words comforted Naruko.

Until now, she was enduring the pain all by herself. Although it was maybe not exactly the case, the part where everyone could not communicate, was made in synch by the trauma.

"Perhaps…yeah. Perhaps."

Having repeated two 'perhaps', Naruko calmed down.

This was because if she really believed it, that would mean…

"Are you idiots?"

Naruko and Chiriko raised their heads abruptly.

"Why don't you believe this? There is no way she couldn't be Menma."

"But, but…"

"Isn't this our chance?"

"Eh…"

Tetsudo showed a serious expression that hadn't ever appeared in the memories of the two girls.

"If Menma's here, then we can apologise to her for everything. Isn't this great?"

This thought matched miraculously with the thought Jinta had yesterday —though Tetsudo didn't know this.

"Yes. Apologise…yeah…"

Naruko was touched by Tetsudo's words. If she could apogloise , then the inevitable feelings she had carried with her so long could …

"Why should we apologise?"

Chiriko asked calmly.

"Do you even have to…"

"Is it your fault that Menma's dead?"

"!!"

Naruko was speechless. She couldn't refute her.

"Stop this, Tsuruko!!"

"…"

"It isn't anyone's fault. It isn't Anaru's fault either. You're acting so strange! At that time, I…also did my best…that…hey, hey!"

Chiriko left before letting him finish. Tetsudo looked at Naruko in panic.

"Hey, Anaru…"

"Stop calling me Anaru."

Having heard this response, his heart a bit more assured…but at the next moment, Tetsudo's heart began to chew on Chiriko's words again.

(Why should we apologise?)

There were many things he wanted to apologise. To name one, it was of her death.

But, why should we apologise…like what Chiriko had said, there weren't specific things to apologise.

(What am I doing?)

Chiriko pondered aimlessly while strolling on the neck of the bridge

Who was hurt? And who hurt him?

(This time, I hurt Anjo.)

No, it wasn't me. The thing that really hurt her must be…

Chiriko believed that Meiko's death was Naruko's fault—such kind of Naruko's thought.

This was because this thought was the same thought she had repeated in her heart for numerous times.

(Everyone had to be hurt.)

She wasn't an exception.

Atsumu stood in a dark room.

It was a room without any decoration, a room that gave account to the fact that Atsumu didn't have any hobbies. There weren't any games, magazines or anything that youngsters would like. Even things pertaining to adults' interest were absent, for example: western music CDs, mountains of plain-text books.

But this room was filled with Atsumu's suffocating persistance. Atsumu stood in the room, without speaking a word or moving an inch…

Bam!

Suddenly, as if reaching his endurance limit, Atsumu kicked away a chair.

He bent his body, clenched his fists, and throw blows at the wall again and again. The pure pain made him more irascible. He wanted even more sharp pain, pain that would let him forget the pain on his chest.

"Who's kidding…who's kidding!!"

He couldn't soothen his anger.

Atsumu's mind was filled with Jinta's flauting attitude.

(Who do you think you are…don't be kidding. That's just some mechanism. That's just some trick anyone is capable of. Who do

you think you are? You're nobody. You're nobody. You're nobody. You're nobody!)

Every time he thought of htim, his blood would seem to boil.

(You don't qualify to mention Menma!)

Even if Menma really existed, why is he the only one who could see her?

What stupid thing was this? Even if it wasn't a spirit but just a hallucination of a homeless dog with its mind went wrong, he couldn't permit such things to happen.

That's right: only he couldn't be forgiven. He couldn't be forgiven for anything that has to do with Menma. As Atsumu was pushed to the edge by his thoughts, he couldn't make a line between what he should do and what he shouldn't.

For he couldn't make a line, he opened the door.

Then, he called upon 'Menma'.

"Come out, Menma…"

It was different from what Jinta had seen, but perhaps it was the same summer spirit that Tetsudo had seen.

"Menma…"

Lightly and gently, he embraced her in his arms. He softly caressed her thin, hard hair. He wanted to speak the words of love, but there wasn't enough time. Yes, time was running out.

"They're too miserable to be fooled by that trick. Nevertheless, I wouldn't forgive them. Menma, I even accepted their nonesense as true. This is the evidence I had almost forgotten you…"

I would never let you become lonely again.

Atsumu made up his mind: I would keep your lonlieness company.

Chapter 13 : The Summer Recluse

I burnt a mosquito-repellent incense. A strand of smoke gradually floated, and flew around the damp living room.

"Mmmah. That's so fragrant. Menma thinks that the smell of mosquito-repellent incense is the best smell in the world!"

Menma was aberrantly excited when I returned home. It was blatant she was just pretending to be joyous, so my look tensed under the action of my subconscious.

Perhaps, Menma was very wary of my look. I have no means to reproach her for this, yet she sang out the happy things happened today.

"Ah…ah. Menma wants to look at Menma. Too bad!"

"…"

"Will Menma Luigi wear the same green dress? Ah, but Menma doesn't have a bit of red." [21]

Everyone believed in the presence of Menma.

As I had imagined, everyone changed their faces and didn't talk after that. They left without leaving a word about Menma. It seemed like they at least believed what I said, like Hisakawa.

"Will Menma Luigi get taller than Menma Mario?"

Even she freaked me out at first. There was no way around.

I could see Menma and talk with her. That was the reason I could accept her presence. But even if I said Menma was there, perhaps to they, who couldn't see spirits, will imagine Menma as a zombie who was incessantly throwing off flesh bits.

She drew 'infinity' in the air. At that time, the Menma they knew wasn't their best friend, Menma they had in their memories.

It was a spirit.

"If Menma Luigi is a quiet beauty, then will Jintan think Menma Luigi is better?"

If they would take her as a spirit—to take her as something with obvious bias—I rather let them reckon Menma as just as my hallucination.

Yes, I hated the fact that she was crowned by another name.

I hated her being crowned by any name other than Menma.

"Hey, Jintan?"

"Ah…eh? What?"

"You're not listening to what I'm saying! Hmph. I'm telling you …Menma Mario..."

"…Menma, let me ask you."

"Ah! You're asking me questions again! You didn't even reply to what I said!"

"Why…should I apologise?"

"!"

Fu. Menma lowered her head.

She thought about it with her head lowered for a while, then slowly, bit by bit, she replied in a soft voice as if unwrapping a messy bundle.

"Menma is better of being secluded."

"Eh…"

Being secluded?

"When I returned home, mother gave Menma…she put curry on Menma's shrine."

"Ah…"

Menma's face became wan.

Menma had returned home. This wasn't any thing inconceviable. But why was she saying this with such a tone and such a lamentable face?

"Mum said Menma is a bit stupid, so she might return home. Mum acting like this will surely make father, Satori, and everyone sad."

Menma said while she clenched the palms put on her kneecap, trying her best to cease the tears rushing into her eyes.

Why did I ask such a cruel question? I wanted to switch our topic immediately, but I knew I must listen to Menma when I saw her trying to weave some words while trembling.

"So, Menma thinks that perhaps it's better to let everyone feel that Menma is already dead and have returned to heaven."

"…"

"This is because no one could see Menma. So, Menma thinks that it's better to be secluded."

Ahah…I sighed.

She was always like this. She said words of fools, did acts of idiots, yet her behaviour was always embedded with the care to her surroundings.

She observed how everyone felt and looked, even when she would become the clown.

"As a result, I did that carelessly. I told everyone I was here. I even ignited the fire rod. If I don't let them see it when they shouldn't…everything would certiainly…"

Tears affluently rushed out from Menma's eyes out of her control.

But, Menma, aren't you very strange now? That is because…

"You couldn't be a recluse."

"Jintan…"

"This is because I can still see you. I've already believed in your presence; I can't believe more."

"Ah!"

Menma looked at me as if seeing something peculiar, such as a spirit, staring at me blankly.

"I'm very happy," Menma murmured in a quiet, surprised voice.

"I'm turning the lights off."

"Okay. Goodnight!"

Menma slept on the bed, and thus I had to sleep on the sofa. I chose another pose to sleep today—my waist aches.

The only light in the dark room was the moonlight spilled through the curtains. The moonlight gently and hazily fell on Menma's white shoulders.

Was the moonlight that bright?

My recent life was basically playing games until I fall asleep… twenty-four seven. The lights in the house were always turned on. I didn't even turn them off even in days when they are not needed.

The flashy fluorescent light always glittered at the dark me, but now…

The natural and gentle brightness covered Menma…

"Jintan."

"Eh…?"

Lying on her side, Menma spoke to me with her back facing me.

"Can I ask you something?"

"What is it? Ahah. Do you have to ask Menma Mario?"

"School. Are you not going to school because of Menma?"

"…"

So soft was the sound that it was about to disappear. What was that?

"Are you very mindful of what Matsuyuki said?"

Matsuyuki did say that I didn't go to school because of Menma's absence, but I didn't have the stamina to bother about every word he said after being said so many bad things by him.

"Yeah. But… but this isn't because of you."

I didn't know what the reason was.

Menma was gone. Mum was gone. I failed my exams. There were so many reasons for refusing to go to school, but…

"…This is because I hate to be bothered. That's all."

"Yes. Oh…"

Menma turned around, the blanket curling around her leg. She looked at me with her eyes flashing with a mischevious beam.

"Ah. Perhaps, this is Menma wish? It's to hope Jintan could go to school!" She said with a playful tone.

"I'm telling you. You're exploiting your wish just to weave reasons."

"Hehe…"

Menma had a bright smile that was obviously pretended.

I spoke as if I wanted to get away with another possibility of mentioning the things that happened in school…

"Well then. Goodnight for real!"

"Yeah. Goodnight."

After a while, Menma's breathing patterns became regular and long.

A lot of things had changed while Menma wasn't here.

My age, height was different from then.

The friendship of the Super Peace Busters was also different. But it would be great if only a bit…no, it would be great if we could be as close as back then.

"Eheh. Jinta-kun. What's the matter?"

The living room was filled with the morning air. During this time, I rarely would wake up before dad goes to work…and I was even wearing my high school uniform. Dad glared at me while I walked downstairs.

"No. Nothing. Nothing special."

"No. Nothing."

Dad repeated what I had said like a parrot mimicing the words of someone. Although he pretended as if nothing had happened, he looked fidgeting apparently.

"H-Have you eaten your breakfast?"

"Yeah. No."

"Is that so? But, eat somehitng. Oh, there's some sour milk."

"Okay…"

I directly walked to the sink and spread a thick paste of toothpaste on my toothbrush. After all, I just wanted to use some stimuli to get away with things that had happened in the past.

I could see dad was preparing for his work through the mirror. He was indeed restless, spying at me occasionaly, and then averting his eyes away when he met his eyes with mine on the mirror.

"Pat."

I spat the peppermint-flavoured saliva out of my mouth.

I was going to school, yet dad seemed not so happy about it.

Having seen dad's response, I was even sure I had given him much trouble. At that time, when I said I didn't want to go to school, he must have been very puzzled…

"Wuaghh!"

Suddenly, Menma was kneeling down beside my feet.

"Eh. Jinta-kun?"

"Ah…No. Nothing."

"This again? You alien from planet No-nothing!"

Exploiting the fact that dad couldn't hear her voice, Menma spoke to me loudly as usual. I could only reply softly, "You woke up so early…"

"Menma was joking."

"Heh?"

Joking—Menma stared at me and said sternly this unappropriate word.

"Menma was joking yesterday about having a wish for Jintan to go to school."

"Eh…"

"It's fine if you don't. Don't push yourself so hard."

As if about to cry, yet trying to provoke me…Sigh. I'm fed up with her already.

"Idiot."

I lightly poked Menma's forehead from an angle dad couldn't see.

"Ah!"

"I just think it's about time I get to school. It's the same as I not going to school: there isn't any specific reason."

"Jintan…"

I definitely would fulfill Menma's wish.

Of course, I don't reckon that Menma's wish was for me to go to school. After all, this had nothing to do with 'everyone'.

But, if I don't do anything, I'll get restless and impatient.

I wanted to be more like myself back then. That's it.

The elongated, nasty, disturbing buzzing sounds of cicadas mixed with the disturbing, iditoic laughing sounds of some blokes. In this ensemble, the voices of those blokes were even advantagous .

The road to school was so short. I gasped in surprise. Of course, this wasn't that surprising. After all, the times I had gone to school aside from the few times for examination were just few and far between.

I really didn't want to go. The more I thought, the faster I got there.

My neck was burnt under the sun so tensely it hurt. Ahah. My sweat is trickling.

Every face of the students passing by seemed familiar to me, yet I felt I had never seen them before. Recognizing people by their faces wasn't that useful. Right. Wasn't it better if I didn't recognize them while I entered the school? Let me just take these noises as a pointless chunk of sound.

I stopped unconsciously while I tried to recognize everyone's face.

"…Hot. It's hot. It's so hot…"

I repeated this same thing again and again.

I was bound to be thought as a weird guy, someone talking to himself over there. However, it couldn't be helped. If I don't say anything, the information invading my ears would be too much I could handle.

"Oh look. Isn't he Yadomi?"

"!!"

Striking out from that chunk of sound was some middle-aged woman with her throat buldged with fat.

I couldn't help but to turn around, happening to see two women, which I seemed to know yet I seemed didn't.

"You're coming to school. Bravo! Bravo!"

Perhaps it was of for I faced directly at them, their vague faces became clear. I could recognize of them was someone that studied at my adajcent class when I was still in middle school.

They should be Anjo's friends by now. But, they didn't seem to this black before? Why the heck would they blacken themselves? It was the colour of roasted pork.

"Uh? You don't look quite right?"

"…"

I glared at her in a bad mood. Stop speaking to me, I tried to imply to her.

The roasted pork seemed to back off a bit, but…

"Rest assured. Rest assured. No one would care if you just didn' t come for a semester, or should I say, no would would care about Yadomi."

"Ahahaha!"

An even louder voice came in.

What the heck are they doing? This roasted pork and that nobody—what are they scheming? Do they want to make fun of me? Or are they…

"Morning…?!"

"Ah. You've come. Naruko."

"Yadomi!"

Oh my, Anjo came at the worst moment. She looked at me; my breathing went stuck.

I couldn't imagine this would happen after all that time we had been toegether yesterday. I also remembered I even grabbed her by the wrist.

But, when I saw her in front of this unfamiliar school…

"But, so to speak, isn't the power of love too magnificent? That's all because you ran an errand to his house!"

"What?!"

"It's so hot! It's a blazingly hot love!!"

The pork chop girl and that nobody ranted all day long. Flustered, Anjo said, "stop it! Who would want this kind of a person to…ah!"

Flashing her eyes, Anjo looked at the 'this kind of a person', I. I, this kind of a person, must have been had his lips trembling crazily …I'm helpless.

But, I don't plan to be helpless forever.

"Hot. That's what it was…"

"Eh?"

I quickly spun my mind around. I was spinning my mind to find the right words to destroy them.

"It was all for this heat that made me dizzy. I wouldn't even have a smallest eager to come to this place almost…like a dumb zoo!"

I screwed it up.

"Ahaha! You bit your tongue!"

"This guy even bit his tongue when he's trying to act cool!"

My face reddened, and my ears heated up.

"Ah…Yadomi!!"

I ran away. Why would I always run away from things?

It was so hot. My ears were blazing hot. The laughing sounds chased me.

But, there were no sounds from Anjo among those laughing sounds, though it was pointless to have noticed this.

Whatever that may mean,I had no companions here.

"…sigh."

I leant on the long bench in the park, the rough wood surface hanging my shirt. A dense canopy of green stretched across and over my head.

I used to play in this park, although there weren't much amusement facilities, making it a boring park for children. It was a place where old men would play croquet.

It was a rod that looked like a wooden rod but much thicker. All of us wanted to touch it and play with it.

As a result, the old men told us this was a sport only for old people. Stamping her feat and yearning, Menma said, "I hope to quickly become an old woman!"

"Menma…I didn't go to school."

I murmured to myself reluctantly.

When I was small, if someone doesn't come to school, I would think it would be all right if those normal ones would still come. However, the truth wasn't that simple. During my half-year of deferring my studies, my body became used to being alone, being unable to handle the eyes of others…

"It's fine if you don't. Don't push yourself so hard."

"…"

Damn it.

I felt as if Menma had seen through all my thoughts and feelings. Perhaps she had also foreseen half of the fact that I didn't go to school at last and ran here.

I couldn't transform back to myself at that time…Menma knew it already.

"…"

I would never admit such a thing.

I could also foresee Menma's behaviour. If I return home now, she would definitely come out to greet me with a smile printed on her face.

Even if I didn't go to school, Menma wouldn't have a word about it. She was that kind of a person who would just plainly accept it.

"…I couldn't return home."

My sweat had trickled below my nose. It was September already, yet summer's end seemed so far a date that was unpredictable…I licked away the sweat that was rolled to my mouth's corner, sensing a salty flavour.

The cool shade under the trees saved me. I lifted my head—the secret base was covered in the atmosphere of the last bits of summer.

It was so hot outside, yet the sunlight that fell upon the ledge of the secret base kept to strangely have the flavour of September. I always felt that this was a bit of a loss.

I had come here.

The things that happened in the Super Peace Busters reunion are mostly bad ones, but on the good side, it helped me to find a place to go aside from home.

"…Huh?"

I pushed the door, and it opened directly.

Wasn't it locked? Hisakawa, you're too careless. Don't you live here all along? If something were stolen…Ah, there are nothing to be stolen here.

"Hey. Hisakawa?"

Having been flashed by the strong light of September, I looked inside the room again, and all I could see was a piece of darkness. It had been enough talking. Let me get in before doing anything else…

"…Wuagh!!"

There was something curled up by a blanket near the door. Curled inside was Hisakwa.

"…Yo, Jintan."

It was a dejected, slow voice that didn't seem what Hisakwa sounded before. His eyes were all red.

"Is…Menma here? Here."

"N-No. She didn't come today. What happened to you?"

"Oh."

The weather was so hot, yet Hisakawa still had to wrap himself with the blanket while crawling up. His pants had become loosened.

"What a thrilling night."

"Ah? Yes…"

"I…believe in Menma's presence," Hisakwa said while scratching his buttocks; his eyes seemed a bit shallow.

"But, getting to the root of it, that's because we trust you, Jintan. If you believe there's Menma, we'll also believe there's Menma. That's how it works."

That was how it worked?

"But…how do I put it…um…"

Hisakawa repeated to scratch his buttocks, maybe he couldn't think of any other action to do. At last, he did another action.

"Hmph! Fufu!"

He pulled the tissue roll on the edge of the table, wiped his snot, and deliberately added a sound effect with his mouth.

Then, he looked at me with a feeling that seemed to be refreshed.

"Indeed. Jintan is special to Menma."

"!"

My face felt like burning.

Special—what a sweet remark. Besides, it wasn't my own egotistical thinking but a name someone else gave. I was special to Menma.

"W-What are you talking about? There's no such a thing," I refuted in an indescribably loud voice.

"But, if it wasn't the case, why do only you could see her?"

"I don't know about this too…"

"Don't be so modest! You're special!"

"Wuaghh!"

Abruptly, I discovered Tsurumi was standing behind me.

"Tsurumi! Let me tell you. Yesterday night, you…!"

"Yesterday night?"

"No. Nothing…"

Tsurumi didn't answer but handed a paper bag to Hisakawa. It was that kind of colourful, checkered, trendy paper bag you can only find in department stores of large cities.

"I've brought this: a mug. When we're having the BBQ, I was shocked to find out that there are so few eating utensils here."

"Eh? Can I…eh? What is this? Isn't this a coffee brewing machine?"

"It's just one we've used. My mum bought a new one back from the charity fund…so this is the old one."

"Wuagh! Thanks! That's so great. Are you one of the nobles, Tsurumi?!"

Hisakawa's eyebrow returned to its original position. Or should I say, it ran to a place even lower than the regular position. Talk about finding people to help by first offering them with some benefits. He was such an easy guy to understand.

"Today Matsuyuki didn't come to school. It seems like he's going to have a long battle, so I think beverages are necessary."

Tsurumi lightly squinted her eyes. What did she mean by a long battle?

"Ohehehehe! Let's have some happy coffee time, shall we?"

Before I got the chance to ask what Tsurumi meant, Hisakawa had already been happily fiddling with the coffee brewing machine.

Tsurumi sat comfortably on the old sofa as if this was her place; she then moved her eye up to meet mine.

"Is Menma responsible to look after your house today?"

"You also believed it?!"

"I don't know. However, I'm counted as skeptical."

At this moment, Hisakawa joined our conversation with a picky tone while battling with the coffee brewing machine. It seemed like he had been listening to what we had been saying at the least.

"What. Didn't you say it was a mass hallucination?"

"I don't mind."

"Heh?"

"I'll also get hurt."

Tsurumi murmured a reply completely irrelevant to Hisakawa's question.

Chapter 14 : Call My Name

"…"

In this heat, Atsumu, who forgot to turn on the air-conditioner, stared straightly at his phone.

Chiriko had sent him a mail: 'we will hold a party to greet Menma today. Everyone in Super Peace Busters will join, though you look like feeling unwell. If you're willing, join us."

"If I'm willing…what does she mean?"

What is willing? He couldn't find any reason to make himself willing.

Atsumu felt irascible, as if he was betrayed by Chiriko.

Everyone in Super Peace Busters?

Atsumu's anger had become Menma's anger. She silently trembled; her short and disarrayed breathing seemed to be at the side of his ear.

Atsumu had already lost his ability to make the right choice. There was no other way to do it even if he had this problem. He thought in the depths of his heart.

(If there is really a Menma whom only he could see…)

How would Menma think if she knew the thoughts I was having? The problem was that Atsumu couldn't stop already. These thoughts couldn't hold him from doing this.

"Menma. Let them see. Let them have a look at you."

Atsumu forcefully pushed the door.

"Ah…"

Meiko practiced her voice in front of the ratating electronic fan.

Before Jinta went to school, he opened the window of his room and even moved the electronic fan upstairs. He didn't know that the hot weather was only a mental cognition to Meiko and not a physical experience. Though he didn't know, he didn't deliberately go to check.

Meiko's accepted Jinta's soft gentleness was to press on the electronic fan.

"Ah…Ah…"

But it was very boring. This bored feeling was also embedded with the worriness for Jinta, making the time harder to bear.

As such, Meiko walked downstairs.

The shrine was placed in the living room.

Although she was aware of its presence, she was still a bit afraid to approach it. The name Jinta's father called towards the shrin and the phot placed on top of it was the gentle face Meiko knew, but there was always some hesitation in her heart that stopped her from checking it out.

Nevertheless, Meiko was sitting on the cushion in front of the shrine without any hesitation.

"Auntie…"[22]

Meiko clasped her hands in front of Jinta's mother. The miraculous scene of a spirit undergoing a memorial ceremony to a deceased person was happening right here.

"Auntie is a lot more beautiful than the one in the photo. Menma's photo is the same: Menma doesn't quite like the photo, but it's a rare one that Menma doesn't make a V gesture. Menma likes to make a V gesture when shooting photos. The photos that don't have her making a V gesture and few and far between."

Then, she lightly rang the bell. The crisp sound reverberated in the damp room, bringing into it a beautiful, refreshing sound.

"Although Menma had died, she's still very lively…"

Trickle, trickle… Something trickled from Menma's eyes.

"Ah. Ahle? What's the matter? Eh?"

Tears drop affluently. Even having rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand, the tears don't seem to cease.

"What about me? How strange…Auntie, please don't laugh at me."

Jinta's mother was gently smiling in the photo, though she couldn't really make the sound of smiling. And in place of this sound was the ringing sound of the doorbell that was about to broken.

"…eh?"

Tap, tap, tap. Meiko climbed up the stairs and came into Jinta's room.

She opened the windows there, stretched her body forward, and looked outside.

"Anjo?!"

In front of the door stood Anjo who was about to be going school.

Overjoyed, Meiko wanted to wave her hands to Naruko.

(An-Anaru…would she be scared of Menma's spirit?)

Meiko remembered the look on Naruko yesterday. It was a very shocked look with her eyes widened in astonishment. Meiko remembered that she hadn't seen this look on her when she was still alive.

(She would certainly be afraid.)

Everyone in Super Peace Busters had become afraid of her.

(Bother.)

Naruko's face was obviously tensed.

She pressed on the doorbell and didn't leave even though there was no one to open the door.

She reckoned Jinta would be in his home, for obviously there was eviodence of someone in the house: the windows of that room were open.

It was the room at the corner on the second floor. If there weren't any change, that must be Jinta's room. The curtains hanging on the windows fluttered lightly like feathers.

(Is Menma also in that room?)

Wind blew at it. Whoosh, it passed the room.

Induced by the wind, the curtains bulged.

Then, the curtains fell down, but at that instant it fell down, it created a mysterious concave shape. It was as if there was someone who cannot be seen standing there.

"!!"

Naruko wavered. But quickly, the rumble in her heart pacified.

The curtains that had changed colour over time showed a captivating white under the sunlight. It was an extremely gentle, graceful white fluttering, like the white dress 'she' wore on that day…

Naruko understood at the spot.

She understood who was standing there.

"Menma. Are you there?"

Meiko heard Naruko's murmur.

Although they were words that couldn't be heard if solely accounting on the volume, Naruko's mouth shape and her expression made Meiko understood.

"Ah!"

Naruko's words implied that Meiko really was there.

"Anaru. Menma…!"

Tears trickled down Menma's face again.

"Call it again. Call Menma again. Anaru…!!"

Meiko rushed out of the room and ran down the stairs as quick as she could. Meiko's heart was galloping: Naruko is willing to accept her, and just like that time, she called her name.

There was no room to think of sophisticated things.

In high spirits, Meiko opened the door…

Chapter 15 : The Wild Beast of Summer

The interior of the secret base was gradually dyed red by the setting sun.

Hisakawa's snoring sound dominated the void around him, unlike Menma. His snoring sounds were like a tyrant.

It was an inexplicable scene.

There was I, who couldn't go back home, Tsurumi, who didn't leave for any reason, and Hisakawa, who basically didn't sleep last night and was now sleeping like dead meat plainly in front of his guests.

But, time wasn't that hard to endure when I was with them.

Tsurumi was now reading a novel. I was playing Hisakawa's boring games, and with a blink of an eye, few hours had already passed.

It was like the old days.

When we were small, a day's time pass like flying, so short it was scary. However, when I idled away time at home, time felt like really slow, so slow I felt impotent in enduring through it.

Nevertheless, when Menma came, the stuck time seemed to move again…

At this moment, Tsurumi raised her head.

"He has come."

"Eh…"

Scuffing walking sounds were heard. Then, the door was open.

"Good evening."

The one entering in was Anjo; Tsurumi's face suddenly grieved. Before I could think over what her expression meant…

"…Kuh!"

I must have showed the most dumb and shocked expression.

"Menma?!"

"Jintan. It's been ages I've seen you…yeah, maybe not that long. This time it's only about half a day!"

Holding Anjo's hand, Menma looked around.

Hisakawa, who was still curled up in the blanket like the daytime, also lifted his head hazily.

"Oh…mmm? Jintan? Did you say Menma just now?"

"Menma…she's there?!"

Oh crap.

I couldn't help but shout, for Anjo and Menma's sudden arrival was completely out of my expectation.

Indeed, Hisakawa and Tsurumi's face tensed, but Anjo didn't; she said, "She's really here."

She showed some puzzlment…a miraculous expression with even some embarrassment within. Then with this expression, she looked at her right hand that Menma was holding.

"Is it here? It feels a bit heavy."

"Heheh. You're right!!"

How should I take this situation? There was no way I could make it up in my mind.

"You guys! Why would you come along together?"

"Umm…we just came across each other in a coincidence."

"You came across each other? Didn't you say you couldn't see Menma?

"Yeah…though I couldn't see her…"

Menm now ran to me with joyful stepping sounds.

"Anjo came to Jintan's house!"

"Eh!"

"Then she just stood at the door! She came to find Jintan and Menma!"

Anjo? Had she been still worried of the episode this morning?

When I lifted my head in surprise, I found out that everyone stared at me with a look of surprise that was different from mine.

"Hey. What did Menma say?"

"Ah…it's…"

"Waaa. Menma has this at home too!"

Menma didn't understand any part of the atmosphere around here and made a fuss over the coffee brewer Tsurumi had brought.

"…she said she has this coffee brewer at her home too."

"Haaaaa?!"

They were stupefied by what I had said.

Three of them all opened their mouths slightly, showing the same expression. This wasn't that weird. After all, we left without making a deep remark about it last night. This should be the first, formal interaction they had, though the topic was about a coffee brewer.

"When you've finished boiling coffee with this thing, it will make a poppy sound. Poppy!"

"She said it will make a poppy sound when the cofee is boiled."

"Poppy…"

It was an abnormally jittery line I had said, making me almost embarrassed while I said it. Anjo lightly said, "it really feels like something Menma would say."

"Eh…"

As if this line was an opportunity, Hisakawa stood up abruptly.

"Right. Let's let Menma have some of this!"

"Hisakawa!"

He poured some coffee into the mug and raised it to mid-air.

"Hey. Jintan. Is Menma here? Here? Or is she there? Please drink!"

"Hisakawa, you!"

"…let Menma have some?"

Menma blankly looked at the mug moving back and forth in front of her, as if incredulous.

Then, Tsurumi commenced, "Menma doesn't like to drink bitter stuff."

"Tsurumi?!"

"Yes. This is the same as that time Let's give Menma some more milk then," Anjo continued what Tsurumi had said.

"Anaru!"

No one…there was no one here that denied Menma's presence.

Yes, at this place…

"Name."

Menma had her name.

I was unwilling to let them take Menma as a spirit or whatnot.

But, I had too many groundless fears.

She was neither a spirit, nor a hallucination, nor the wild beast of summer. Menma was Menma. At this place, Menma truly had her own name.

Though they couldn't see her, they still…

"Ah!"

Menma's eyes flashed with tears.

"Everyone…I love everyone!!"

Shouting, Menma embraced Hisakawa's waist.

"Mmm? Ah, ahah…what's the matter?"

I couldn't help laughing.

"Menma is now embracing you."

"Eh? Men-Menma!!"

"Ahaha!"

"It's been ages since we have had this joyful time. Hey, Menma …are you holdong my stomach? You will make me want to pee, hey!"

Hisakawa turned around in circles happily, Menma following him spinning while laughing.

"Poppo, go to pee! Menma wants to go too!"

"Menma said she wants to go to pee with you."

"Ohoh. Menma, you can't peek! This stimulation is too big for kids!"

"Eheheh…"

As they talked, Hisakawa and Menma had left the secret base through the door.

"Peeing together…this lacks the needed nervousness…"

Anjo murmured in surprise. I also felt hugely impotent, lying flat on the spot.

"Yadomi?"

What a happy look.

"It's great," I murmured consciouslessly.

Tsurumi looked at me with the corner of her eyes, "I've also said I didn't truly believe it."

"Ah! Yes."

"But…"

Tsurumi stared frontwards.

As if foreseeing something to come, she just stared plainly frontwards…

"If I don't believe in it, I couldn't advance."

"Eh…?"

At this moment…Boom!

"Wuaghhh!!!!"

"Yaaaaaaa!!"

The door was violently pushed open; Hisakawa and Menma rushed in in a speed that caused them to almost fall down.

"Hisakawa. Your flyers open."

"Oh! Sorry…no! I saw it. I saw it!!"

"Heh? Saw what…?"

"Menma!!"

"Haaaaaaa?!"

I was dashing in the summer night.

In this dying heat, there was only the songs of early autumn sang in chorus by those insects.

Ahah. Why was I always running? I had run in these woods yesterday night already.

When I was small, I would always run in these woods.

"Haah…Haah!"

I messed up my breathing pattern—seems like my body conditions had deterioated greatly.

Hisakawa had been long running before me. Tsurumi and Anjo ran in different directions from me. And when I was mindful of where Menma was, she was gone already.

I didn't believe that there was another Menma.

I thought it might be possible when Hisakawa said he had seen Menma previously, for Menma was my hallucination, and it was normal for others to see similar hallucinations.

However, I couldn't believe it now. This was because Menma, though a cry baby and her thinking drifts off a bit, she would always care for the feelings of others. Every part of her constituted to Menma's complete facet.

If she were to be taken as a spirit, I would rather let her be my hallucination forever—this thought vanished from me unknowingly. Menma was Menma. Menma could only be Menma.

But, he told me there was another Menma. A strange sense of foreboding started to thrash in my heart.

If there really was another Menma.

This Menma weren't with anybody; she was alone.

Then, I would want to find her.

I want to confirm this; I want to call her name; even if I couldn't see her, I wanted to understand her.

Menma couldn't experience the feeling as a secluse. If this feeling were to be experienced by another Menma, this would be too arduous for her…

"Wuaaaaaa!!"

Hearing Hisakawa's shouts, I lifted my head abruptly.

The trees and the buzzing sounds of insects messed up my sense of distance. At this time did I find out that not only

Hisakawa but also Tusurmi, Anjo, and Menma was closer than I had thought.

"I found her. She's Menma!"

"Eh?!"

I looked at the direction Hisakawa was pointing to.

"!!"

At the farthest tip of my view, there was a white shadow flying through the crevices between trees. The dress that was lifted by the night wind belonged to…

"…Menma?!"

Chapter 16 : Punishment

Hearing Hisakawa's sound, 'Menma' slightly squinted its eyes.

It thought it wouldn't be discovered, or at least it wouldn't be caught up. Being so familiar to these woods, it thought no one in the Super Peace Busters could catch it.

It was just a way to let them smell the last fragrance of 'Menma'.

Hisakawa and others had searched in a new direction.

'Menma' wasn't discovered. It got out from the darkness so uneasily, yet it was covered in the thick night colour again.

Darkness could only give birth to a new darkness. 'Menma' couldn't find this out.

"…"

Hid under the shadow of the trees, 'Menma' spied the dashing Jinta with his bare feet sunken deep into the bushes, but Jinta didn't spot itself.

Yes. Jinta couldn't see it. Never could he see 'Menma'.

Enjoying Jinta's ugly running pose, a funny feeling came over 'Menma', and thus 'Menma' raised the corner of his lips.

But, Chiriko then suddenly cried out.

"Eh, eh!!"

Everyone looked at Chiriko, including 'Menma'.

Bearing all those eyes, Chiriko raised her head determinedly

"With such a huge figure, no matter how clean you shave your thigh hair, it still doesn't work…Matsuyuki Atsumu!!"

"Eh!"

Hearing Chiriko's words, 'Menma' was terribly shattered.

The waver in its heart wast put forth into an action—escape. Its legs started running by itself, making scuffing sounds. Its abrupt actions caused its slippers to cling to some bushes, making notable sounds.

"Ah…there it is!!"

"?!"

Following Naruko's voice, 'Menma' flew away from there.

Run away! Run away, 'Menma'! If it goes on like this, you will be trapped in darkness again. Everyone would forget you.

I couldn't let you people forget, but definitely I wouldn't let you catch me.

Run away. Stop focusing on your feet. Run away. How could I not focus on my feet when running in the woods at night?

It was almost placing my life at stake—Menma ran with an incredibly risky speed. And for this reason, when the tree roots that were sticking out tripped its feet, pulling 'Menma' down on the bed of the woods—there it fell.

Scuff, scuff, scuff, scuff!!"

"Hey, hey! It fell over?!"

With Tetsudo as the lead, the Super Peace Busters had arrived.

The light from the flashlight shone on the place where the person wearing the white dress fell down. The beam searched in the darkness for a while, and then, they found it out.

Everyone's breathing was obstructed.

Appearing before their very eyes was a figure wearing a white dress—the true figure of the other Menma.

"Yukiatsu."

Chiriko mumbled.

After such a long time—a really long time—Chiriko called his nickname.

He was in such a difficult condition.

His thick and solid arms grotesquely stretched out from the lace borders. There was a sky blue ribbon hung on the chest. It wasn't a decoration of the dress itself but an extension he added to imitate Menma. The ribbon was hung very tight and was glimmering.

Then, the silver hair reflected under the moonlight showed the original hair colour when Atsumu tilted his head a bit.

It was a wig.

Jina looked lifelessly at Atsumu, and then he came back to his senses abruptly.

"Menma…"

Meiko was about to get down to the steep slope where Atsumu was. Jinta chased behind her in a hurry.

"Wait…Menma?!"

Scuff. Jinta was frozen as he looked below the slope.

Atsumu, who had been motionless with his head lowered, raised his head. A flashing light shone through his eyes.

"Ah…are you all right?" Jinta asked Atsumu with a feeble voice .

"All right…?"

Atsumu showed a sinister smile. With close examination, Jinta could see that his face was whiter than usual, his lips pale pink, as if he had did some makeup.

"Do you think I look all right?"

"Ah…"

"Come. Look clearer!"

Atsumu grasped Jinta's lapel of his jacket, and then pushed him down, riding on him.

"Mmm..?!"

"Hey. Stop it already. Yukiatsu!"

When Tetsudo wanted to get down there, Chiriko put her hand on his shoulders.

"Please, Hisakawa. Just look."

"Heh? B-But…"

"This is a chance. If we miss this, I'm sure we won't have it again…"

They were within Chiriko's view—everyon'e view.

Atsumu, who pretended to be Meiko, was now pressing on Jinta.

"Hey. Do I look like Meiko?"

"Mmm…"

"Didn't you see Meiko? Do I look like Meiko…do I?!"

"Yukiatsu…Mmm?!"

Atsumu pulled Jinta by the lapel and stuck his face into it. They were so close they could almost feel each other's breathing.

"It's my fault."

"!!"

"On that day, Menma would die was all my fault."

"W-What are you saying? It wasn't your fault! It looked more like mine…Mmm?!"

"It's my fault! I said it's my fault!!"

Atsumu violently shook Jinta.

Right, Jinta could feel something trickling down his face—they were tears.

"Eh…?"

"If I didn't say something like to Menma, Menma wouldn't die …it's I who caused Menma's death!!"

Showers of tears affluently streamed from Atsumu's eyes.

"If Menma really appear, she should appear before me…if she had to be a curse as a resentful spirit, she should also appear before me!!"

If Menma really appeared…

Jinta rolled his eyes and looked at Menma. Menma was staring at them seriously with straightforward eyes.

"But Menma didn't appear! She didn't appear before me!!"

Yet, Meiko was now standing beside Atsumu.

"So, Menma isn't here…isn't in this world now!!"

She was just beside him. He wanted to hold her last face, the face that belonged to a person he couldn't embrace anymore; and hence he prayed to become one body with her. Yet, she was just beside him, though Atsumu was totally unaware of this fact.

Even if he cry out loudly…even if his heart hurts so badly…

"Yukiatsu…Men-Menma?"

Atsumu's eyebrows jumped to Jinta's reaction.

"…eh?"

Meiko approached Atsumu and softly wiped his tears for him.

"What?!"

Atsumu was aware now. Something warm and soft softly touched his cheeks.

"Menma…is touching you."

"Ah…ah."

Atsumu's whole body was trembling.

"No…this isn't it…this isn't it…"

He could feel it.

Before his mind could make it up, his body did. He made up the memoriable warmth of Meiko.

He was confused. He wanted to deny it, yet he wanted to accept it.

The person he longed for so long, Meiko...

Meiko looked at Jinta and said something in his ear. Jinta accepted Meko's feelings and nodded his head solemnly.

"Menma wants me to tell something to you."

"Eh…"

"Thanks for the hair clip. She also said, sorry…"

"!!"

Atsumu's body shivered greatly. Then, he jumped off of Jinta's body as if escaping.

"Yukiatsu!!"

He dashed up the slope.

"Hey, hey! Yukiatsu!"

His heart was quaking. Atsumu neglected Tetsudo and Naruko and passed through Chiriko without even turning his head around .

"…"

Chiriko heaved a long sigh. Chiriko, who usually feared cold, was now covered with a shirt immersed in sweat.

Atsumu's memory of that day was a memory he could never forget.

On that day, Meiko rushed out of the sercret base, chasing Jinta. And Atsumu was chasing behind Meiko.

"Wait, Menma!"

"I can't wait! If I don't run faster, Jintan would get away."

"You don't need to care for that guy!"

Hearing Atsumu's shouts, Meiko stopped running unconsciously.

"Menma isn't any ugly girl…"

Atsumu stretched his hand into his short pants and took out a hair clip. A small pink flower was imprinted on it.

"For you."

"Eh…"

"I think this hair clip is very suitable for you, Menma."

He had bought it a month ago, but he couldn't find a chance to give her. Nevertheless, it was the time now.

Atsumu's face turned red, and he didn't dare to look at Meiko's face. Then, he cried,"it's for my favourite Menma!"

It was the first confession experienced to either Atsumu or Meiko.

"Ah…Sor-Sorry!"

However, Meiko ran away in panic.

"Eh…"

"Um…Jinta is about to run away! Um, sorry…let's talk about this next time!"

Bang and pop. Meiko had run afar.

Atsumu could only see her off.

"Rats!" He cried, throwing the hair clip in his hand into the bushes.

The same hair clip was worn by the 'Menma' Atsumu was holding in his hands.

It wasn't 'Menma' anymore but just the scraps of Atsumu's persistence. It was just a Meiko shell with a wig and a hair clip.

Atsumu leaned on the fence of the bridge, gazing steadily at the wig. The dress was put at his feet's side. He was wearing a ridiculous costume composed of a sleevless garment and a short pants with a jacket covering him.

It looked as if Atsumu could easily discard the appearance as ' Menma', but in his heart…if he could really discard it like taking off clothes, perhaps he would have been saved early on.

"You look devastated."

He lifted is head.

Chiriko was standing there. She must have chased him here.

"Are you satisfied now?"

"…"

"You knew everything from the very start…

"Don't you wish I knew it?"

Chiriko knew where Atsumu bought the dress.

This is because she bought it with him after school. Not only was the dress but also the hair clip was bought. She was just shocked that he even had a wig.

Chiriko didn't ask what Atsumu bought them for. Atsumu didn 't have the intention to explain to her.

Both of them remained silent. They had their own 'Meiko trauma'. It was their new connection, unlike the one they had when they were small.

The connection should be like this originally.

But Chiriko…

"Why did you betray me?"

"…"

"What do you want to do?

(What do I want to do?)

Even Chiriko was unclear of what she felt.

Nevertheless, Chiriko wanted to save Atsumu. She wanted to pull him out from the 'Menma' darkness.

She had known this wouldn't work. This would only pour salt on Atsumu's wound, but Chiriko had prepared for this.

(I would suffer the pain with you.)

"Give it to me."

"Ah…"

Chiriko picked up the dress beside Atsumu's feet.

Scuff…

She covered the wide dress on herself.

Then, she snatched the wig from Chiriko's hand and wore it on herself. Quickly, she had silver hair. Chiriko became the same as ' Meiko'.

"Menma!"

Atsumu looked at the Menma in front of him, weeping.

Then, as if he had lost his strength, he fell down and embraced the same thing as 'Menma', Chiriko at her waist.

Chiriko stroked Atsumu's hair lightly. It was a light brown, soft hair with a fragrance of summer grass.

"Menma…please don't leave me again. Please don't leave me…"

Atsumu repeated brushing against Chiriko's waist. Chiriko gently smiled and solemnly nodded her head.

"I know…I would stay with you forever, Yukiatsu."

To stay with you forever…

Chiriko was also hurt.

It wasn't something that actually happened but just an imagination. With the dress in her hands, all she could do to it was to stare at it silently.

(Never could I become like Menma.)

Atsumu slowly stood up.

"Where are you going?"

"Where could I go apart from going back?"

"Where's the dress? Give it back to me."

"…"

Chiriko handed him the dress. Atsumu snatched it violently, turned away, and left."

Seeing him off, Chiriko wondered what she could do to bring an end to this endless night. Chiriko didn't know what to do.

It really hurt—Chiriko was hurt.

But, she couldn't cry, for Atsumu upon her eyes was hurt more seriously than her.

Atsumu's 'Menma' had vanished.

But it was only what it seemed. 'Menma' was still here: here, over there…there was sign of her existence everywhere.

No one could escape from 'Menma'. Everyone was caught by ' Menma's' face.

The river flowed slowly under the illumination of the moonlight. The trickling, cold waterflowing sound was telling them that they could never be forgiven.

Chapter 17 : Menma and I

Having said goodbye to Hisakawa and Anjo, Menma and I walked back home.

Menma, who likes to speak so much, was now silent. Therefore, I also kept silent while I walked.

My chest that had been held onto by Matsuyuki still seemed to emit faint heat.

I wanted to say something to Menma, but I couldn't find my words; I didn't know what I should say.

Perhaps, Menma was now having the same feeling as I. She wanted to say something, but…

Matsuyuki's face would always pop up in the head.

Then, all the words would be swept away by the turbulent emotions on the chest before they could reach the throat.

Spontaneously, the street lamps flashed brightly and dimly in the dark town. The street lamps were very far from each other. Menma's body was shone after all that darkness but was then submerged in darkness again after a while.

Morning, come quicker.

I prayed to the night that had come just a moment ago.

Morning, come quicker…and shine upon Menma's smile.

Chapter 18: Third Memory

The white flower, like the jellyfish towel, was about to vanish.

I had to make a wish before it would vanish. As if making wishes to shooting stars, I had to make wishes to things about to vanish.

What wish should I make?

It couldn't hold on anymore; it was about to vanish. Please don't go, the white flower. I hadn't made up my mind yet. Right, I hope…

I hope we could meet again.

References

1. ↑ Wikipedia: Darumasan ga Koronda
2. ↑ A game where the one who plays the ghost appoints a specific color. Other players who can get to a place with that color before being caught by the ghost win.
3. ↑ A pokémon
4. ↑ Wikipedia: Ramen
5. ↑ Anaru sounds the same as anus—Japanese, that is.
6. ↑ A funny comedian
7. ↑ One of this artist's trademark greetings
8. ↑ When Menma is added with an honorific, it is the abbreviation for sorry Menma
9. ↑ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sauce
10. ↑ accepted by injection via a medical syringe with a needle... a really sharp needle
11. ↑ Japanese places
12. ↑ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bobobo-bo_Bo-bobo
13. ↑ go watch pokemon
14. ↑ basically pokemon
15. ↑ go and play pokemon already
16. ↑ pokemon
17. ↑ yo is a trademark line
18. ↑ Delta has the same sound in Japanese as 'appeared'
19. ↑ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teppanyaki
20. ↑ poppo is just another name for the fire, not Hisakawa
21. ↑ Luigi is the Mario's brother in Super Mario Bros.
22. ↑ Japanese people use 'aunt' as a polite referral to someone else's mother. Auntie is used here to express their close relationship, and it is also a more childish way of saying it